

## Walking the Monochrome

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## Walking the Monochrome

by [emilywaters1976](#)

### Summary

That's what being a dog is like – it's like you're walking the very edge of the world, where almost all colour has run out, and you know that should you miss a step, you'll fall off that edge... Then again, you already know all about it. The edge and the falling." AU of the first war.

## part I

**October 1983**

Padfoot woke up feeling the warmth of another's body next to him. Snape was breathing in and out, deeply and evenly. Snape's fingers were buried in the dog's fur, in a mindless half-stroking, half-tugging.

Padfoot sighed and rested his chin on Snape's bony shoulder. He loved mornings like this – mornings when he could be his canine self for just a bit longer, enjoy the absent caresses of Snape's hand.

Life was much simpler that way – approaching the monochrome, with nothing but the instincts and the scents, and the desire to feel someone's touch.

Snape's hand stroked the dog's back again.

Padfoot stretched out. A deep, pitiful whimper emerged from his throat, and he caught it before it could turn into a howl.

He wanted to howl more and more lately – and that just wouldn't do.

Perhaps, it was time to return to his human self.

Sirius opened his eyes and sat up. The tent was tiny, barely enough for two. Then again, Snape didn't take up much space – no matter how well Sirius took care of him, he remained a scrawny walking stick of a man.

Sirius unzipped the tent door and poked his head out. It must have rained at night: the fly shed copious cold droplets on his head. Sirius huffed and crawled back to Snape.

"Wake up, lazybones. Wake up, I say. It's a new day."

He shook Snape's shoulder and then pulled up the eyelid of his right eye unceremoniously. The eye opened, but its stare was blank and lifeless, as always. The left eye was a mess of scar tissue, a hollow eye socket, the lid torn off.

"Up!" Sirius said. "Up, you lazy, good-for-nothing sod. It's time to walk. And yes, I'll carry all the shit on my own back like a pack mule. You really have it good, you know."

No reply came, of course.

Sirius gritted his teeth. He'd give anything now, anything at all – for a snide remark, for a punch to the face, for a good tussle in the damp autumn leaves.

Snape's body sagged in Sirius' arms like a rag doll, but Sirius was patient, guiding Snape to sit up, unzipping the sleeping bag around him, pulling him out of the tent into a clearing between the tall cedar trees.

Sirius flicked his wand to cast a drying charm on the tent and scowled when nothing happened. He

still couldn't get used to this: to magic not working in these woods, to being unable to Apparate. Some said this particular forest was imbued with a magic of its own, and perceived any foreign kind of wizardry as an insult. Others claimed it was the intricate network of defensive charms and incantations established by the Institute to prevent someone else's wandwork.

Either way, the only thing left now was walking.

"Today is the last day," Sirius said. "And no, I don't want to hear any snide remarks about how I got us both lost in the wilderness and how we'll never make it. I know exactly what I'm doing."

Snape's face remained completely expressionless, as it had been for the past two years.

"Fuck you, Snape," Sirius said. "A bit of reaction now and then would be nice. But you know what – just fuck you."

He unpacked the food sack and pulled out the food bars, stuffed one of them into Snape's lifeless hand.

"Eat."

For a brief moment, Snape's hand clutched at the food bar, and then, it slipped out of his fingers and fell to the ground.

For another brief moment, Sirius was truly terrified. It had taken him a long time to train Snape's unresponsive body to perform the functions necessary for survival – simply by rote memory. However, from time to time, something glitched and Snape's body forgot how to function. Back home, when that happened, magic was there at Sirius' fingertips to compensate. Now... it was just him and Snape.

"Come on, Snape, don't do this to me. Please? How fucking hard is it – to just put the bloody thing in your mouth and chew?"

He brought the food bar to Snape's mouth and traced a line on his lips with it. "Food. Food is good. Eat food, Snape... bloody hell, you've reduced my vocabulary to an utterly moronic level."

Snape's lips remained tightly sealed.

"Okay, forget food. Nobody ever died from one day without food, but you'll drink water, won't you?"

The water Snape accepted when the cup was brought to his lips. Sirius watched him raptly, afraid that water might go down the wrong way, but nothing happened. Snape drank without an incident.

"That's good, Snape," Sirius said. "Good job. Okay, I'm going to pack up our shit, and then we're going to hike to the pier."

The tent's yellow wing gave a last flutter to the wind and folded down on the ground. Sirius disassembled the poles, packed up the sleeping bags and stuffed everything into the giant backpack which he then hoisted onto his shoulders.

"All right, Snape," Sirius chattered as cheerfully as he could manage, "off we go. Turn around... yes... you feel the path under your feet? That's the trail. Give me your hand. Now we walk. Yes, just like that. Just pretend we're children, about to enter Hogwarts Express, holding hands – yes, I

know it never happened, but just pretend, would you?"

Snape walked with him, step by mechanical step. The open right eye stared unseeingly ahead. Sirius squeezed his hand tightly.

"Snape, we're doing it, and it's final."

## **October 1981**

Tom Riddle spoke.

Snape stared at him mutely, barely understanding what was being said. He only knew that he was terrified, so much that he could barely credit it. His entire gut was twisted into a tight knot; his breath came labored and hitched. In fact, it seemed impossible for one human being to feel this much fear and still live.

"Today," Tom spoke, and his voice, magnified by Sonorus, carried all the way across the great gathering of his servants, "I am about to extend my deepest thanks to my two most faithful followers. Severus Snape, who delivered the Prophecy to me," in a grand gesture Tom pointed to Snape, "and my dear Peter, who will be delivering the Potters into my hands." Someone gasped with envy, as Tom continued, "You see, Peter here managed to become their Secret Keeper."

The pudgy-faced man bowed deeply to his Lord.

Snape gave the Marauder a brief glance.

Merlin only knew why Tom was doing this, why he'd chosen this great farce before setting out to finish off the Potters. It seemed like he was doing it on a whim, as an after-thought. Either way, Snape knew – this was it.

He'd begged Tom for Lily's life, then, still not fully confident that she'd be spared, he ran to Dumbledore. Both great wizards made promises. Dumbledore's promise seemed to offer more certainty... until now.

Well done, Dumbledore, Snape thought bitterly. Let them choose the traitor as the Secret Keeper. Would it have been so bloody difficult to nominate yourself for the job?

His body was twisted with terror, almost ready to give in, but his mind was shockingly clear. He knew that this was the end of all things.

Tom's face, once handsome and proud, in the glimmer of torches in the dark of the night, seemed mad, inhuman.

What on earth has he done to himself to make him what he is? Snape wondered.

More importantly, would Lily live through the night when this monster, barely human, appeared at her doorstep?

Snape already knew that she wouldn't.

He knew that with crystal clarity, because he knew Lily. She'd fight like mad. She'd fight for her husband, her child, she'd never accept any offer of mercy from Tom.

And even if she were spared, somehow, she would never let go of her child.

Snape didn't know how he knew all that – mere two weeks ago these thoughts wouldn't have entered his mind; he would have been content with saving Lily alone and resigning himself to the utter impossibility of saving the child. But now... Perhaps, talking to Dumbledore had rubbed off on him more than he realized.

“It is our choices that show what we truly are.”

True, except now he's ran out of choices and ran out of time to make them.

Tom's aged hand rested on Peter's shoulder, and the man sagged as if under a great weight.

Snape's heart beat so loud that he was certain the entire world could hear it.

His wand trembled in his hand.

The only chance is now, he thought. All he needed was enough time for two Killing Curses. One for Peter, one for himself. Without Peter as their Keeper, Potters would live another day, get another chance. And as for himself – Snape wasn't deluding himself for a moment. He wouldn't be able to run, not with the crowd of Tom's servants all around him, and he wasn't mad enough to surrender himself to their tender care after betraying his Lord in everyone's presence.

So this is it. His breath evened out, and his heart stilled in his chest. It seemed to him that the entire world was holding its breath, waiting for him.

It was strange for him to, at this last moment, remembered James Potter's face, handsome, hateful and hated, arrogant, and without a trace of cowardice. It's your turn now, Snape thought. I'll be gone, and it's your turn to protect her. Save her, and we'll be even, you and I. I mean it. But for now – for this last time, I will hate you with all that I've got; you don't mind, do you? I really need to.

It took him a split second to raise his wand and another split second to summon all the rage and hate he'd ever felt for James, for Sirius, for the werewolf and for Peter – and send it flying.

The flash of green cut across the field and hit Peter squarely in the chest.

Snape moved quickly, but not quickly enough.

He saw the rage on Tom's inhuman face, and a mere moment later the world went blank.

He never got the chance to cast the second Killing Curse.

## **1983**

After two hours of walking, Sirius and Snape made it to a large clearing at the edge of the woods. The path led through the field of dry, sun-bleached grass, and onto the pebbly beach. The ocean was grey, drowning in the mist, a faded boundary between the water and the sky. Barely visible in that white mist, on the pier stood a lonely figure of a man.

“Come now,” Sirius said, pulling on Snape’s arm. “We made it, you hear me? We made it.”

They walked the path together, and Sirius led Snape onto the pier, tied to which by a slippery wet rope was a boat that looked like it had seen better days – and decades.

“This will take us to the Black Tail island?” Sirius checked. The hooded figure nodded silently. “No offence, but it looks like the boat is ready to fall apart any moment.”

The man lifted a gloved hand to remove his hood. His aged face was severe, tanned and weathered. His eyes were small, beady, and black, like tiny marbles that children play with.

“Afraid of water, dog-man?” he asked, and a small unkind smile crossed his lips. “A great wolf-hound could swim ashore and not even get cold.”

“What about him?” Sirius’ hand squeezed Snape’s fingers even harder.

“What of him? He’s not a man, but a shell. Perhaps you should just drown him.”

Sirius swallowed hard. Nobody – ever – spoke to him about Snape like that. It was all very polite, very tactful: “Just let him stay in Mungo’s ward for the incurably insane”, “Just go on and live our own life, Sirius, you deserve it,” “it’s hopeless, you must realize that by now” ... And yet, it did all boil down to this, didn’t it?

Sirius stared at their guide hatefully. And perhaps I should have you keel-hauled a few times, then feed your still breathing body to the cougars, he thought, but held back from saying it out loud. Funny. He finally learned to keep his temper in check after all these years. Maybe Lil is right, and I’m really growing up....

“What are you silent for, dog-man?” The guide asked. There was no mockery in his voice. “You are protective of him, but he’s empty, isn’t he? Is that why you brought him here? To die?”

“No. No. He’ll not die here. And he’s not empty.” Sirius pulled the unresponsive Snape closer.

“Hiding, then,” the guide guessed. “Yes, that may be. It may be that he made himself so small, that he’s become a speck in the vastness of his own mind. And that dot, that speck, will never grow back big enough to fill the emptiness that is now him.”

“You don’t know that,” Sirius said through the gritted teeth.

“I wonder,” the guide mused, tugging at the rope to pull the boat closer to the pier, “what happened to make him retreat this way?”

“None of your business,” Sirius said.

He threw the backpack into the boat and then proceeded to guide Snape there, taking care not letting him stumble. A wave splashed, dowsing them with ice-cold water. Snape never flinched.

“It must have been terrifying,” the guide said.

The wind was freezing. Sirius wrapped his arms around Snape and stretched his jacket out, allowing it to cover both of them so they’d be sharing body heat.

And so that Sirius would have the opportunity to grab him, if the bloody boat capsized.

The guide took the oars and began to paddle away. Soon, the pier and the shoreline were lost in the fog. The sky above them was grey and fuzzy, and they became a directionless speck in this vast greyness, carried somewhere by the currents and the wind. The oars seemed to do little to add to the speed of the direction of the boat, and eventually the guide let them rest.

Sirius swallowed hard. I am crazy, he thought, Jay was right, and Lil was right, and Rem, too. I'm crazy, I'm going to get both of us killed, and – Snape, you are fucking going to drown never even knowing that you're drowning.

His heart was beating against Snape's bony back.

The guide stretched out in the boat, arms crossed on his chest. His face looked less severe now, and the beady eyes seemed somehow more human.

"What's your name, dog-man?" he asked.

"Sirius."

"Really?"

"Really."

The guide nodded. "That's nice. My name's Stu."

## **1981**

When the Fidelius came down, they could feel the tremor throughout the house. Lily rushed to Harry's crib and gathered the crying child in her arms. James, still in his pajamas, went for the glasses and the wand.

"Peter must be dead," he said. His voice shook slightly. "Fuck. Just fuck. How did they..."

"Jay, we need to get out of here," Lily cut him off. She was all action and no emotion. She cast a Mufflato to silence Harry's cries and slipped her feet into her shoes.

"Right. Start packing. Take just the bare essentials."

"No. We're leaving this instant. Jay, cast a side-along Apparition. Take us to Hogsmeade. We're going to Dumbledore."

"All right."

He loathed to subject the school to danger by their mere presence, but they were out of options. And casting a quick glance at Harry at Lily's chest removed any doubt that he still might have had.

With Fidelius in place, this Muggle house in Godric's Hollow never required Anti-Apparition charms, and now that the Fidelius was gone, they could Apparate out freely. That meant, of course, that anyone could Apparate in just as easily.

Without much delay they found themselves in Hogsmeade. They must have been quite a sight: Lily, in her nightgown, holding on to Harry, James, in his pajamas with the deer prints, the ones that Sirius had given him.

It didn't take James long to work out the most reasonable course of action. A moment later, Prongs was kneeling down, offering his back to Lily. She climbed to straddle his back and held on for her life, and Harry's, as the deer sprinted towards Hogwarts.

The school wards admitted them – of course, Albus had always said they'd find a home at Hogwarts. However, the alarm spells did go off, and shortly, a small crowd of people was converging on the deer with a woman and a child on his back. There was Filch, Mrs. Norris at his heels, tail puffed up so bushy it looked like a giant toilet brush. There was McGonagall, wand out and ready to fight. There was Flitwick, shining a lantern half his size to illuminate the intruders. And Albus, bless him, Albus was here too, receiving the child from Lily's hands, and pressing a tender kiss to Lily's forehead. And Lily's calm was gone, she now cried in his arms, whispering Peter's name, over and over again.

Prongs had folded himself down and James got off the ground, taking Lily by the elbow.

"We're sorry," he said. "Peter is dead. We didn't know where else to go."

"Come," Dumbledore said mildly. "Come now. We'll talk."

In Dumbledore's private rooms they sat down, and James finally allowed himself to breathe – for the moment. They made it, Harry was safe – for the moment, only... Only they had no action plan, no permanent shelter, and they were a danger to everyone around them.

"Now," Dumbledore said softly, "are you certain that Peter is dead?"

"The Fidelius came down – oh, about fifteen minutes ago," James said.

"Oh. I see." Dumbledore frowned, thinking of something. "I'm truly sorry for your loss."

They were silent for a while. Lily sniffled and hugged her knees, wrapping herself in Dumbledore's quilted blanket. Harry, in Dumbledore's arms, was soothed and sound asleep again. Dumbledore was studying the child's small tear-stained face. He traced Harry's forehead with his finger.

"Forgive me, both of you," he murmured. "Forgive me, my dear ones."

"For what?" James whispered, unnerved by the brokenness of Dumbledore's voice.

"Sometimes I forget how fragile life is. I begin to think of this war as a chess game. Trying to outthink, outlast, outmaneuver our opponent."

"You're a brilliant strategist," James argued, "if not for you..."

Dumbledore lifted his head to stare at him. The fierce fury in his eyes was frightening.

His mild manners and kind smiles usually made it easy to forget that Dumbledore was the most powerful wizard alive, but now James was reminded of it yet again, with crystal clarity.

"I rather think the game is over, Mister Potter," he said, and the intensity of his voice made the



room in the air churn. “I say, we stop planning. We stop maneuvering. Instead, we gather our forces and give it all we’ve got. And we blast that band of murdering scum across the land and up to high heavens and back, if that’s what it takes, and we do so now.” His aged face looked gloriously mad, and James found that madness contagious.

“Let’s do it,” he nodded. “Lil, what do you say?”

“We fight, and we fight now,” she agreed. Her voice didn’t tremble. “We fight with all we’ve got.”

“Well, then,” Dumbledore’s tone was mild again, “you two should get dressed. James, you may help yourself to anything you like from my wardrobe. Lily, I believe Minerva will have a few things your size, and you should be able to charm them to fit perfectly. Harry can stay in Flitwick’s care for a few days, isn’t that so? Glad you agree. Get ready, whilst I gather the Order to join us right here. We’re going to act without delay.”

## 1983

“What is the patient’s name?”

Sirius stared at the young woman seated across the desk from him. The woman’s skin was like Stu’s, kind of dark olive, except hers was perfectly smooth. She was smiling, but the smile seemed cold and unnatural.

They’d been introduced: Stu did the honours after getting Sirius and Snape off the boat. Her name was Andra Bluebrook.

“You’re Indian, aren’t you?” Sirius blurted out, studying her face intently. A strange face, almost pretty, but not quite. Indeterminate age, she could have been twenty—or fifty.

“The term is First Nations. I’m Haida. This is irrelevant to our discussion. I repeat – what is the patient’s name?”

“Severus Snape,” Sirius said.

“Very nice. How did you hear of the Institute? We don’t advertise our existence, or our location.”

“I – I’ve read about your work on regeneration of vital organs in Potions Weekly magazine,” Sirius said, “then I did some investigating...”

“Snooping around, you mean?” He frozen smile never faded.

“Yes. Some of that, too,” Sirius confessed.

“You are interested in Potions, then,” she said. “You’re a scholar.”

“No. I don’t care for Potions. He did, though,” Sirius inclined his head in Snape’s direction. “I was reading to him when I encountered the article.”

“You read to him.”

“Yes. I read to him.”

“Why?” she asked that question in a very odd way, as if not really caring about the answer.

“Because... well, I don’t know.”

“He can’t hear you.”

“No.”

“He can’t see anything, either.”

“No.”

“If I stab his hand with a knife, will he flinch?”

Sirius’s fingers laced with Snape’s, and he instinctively pushed Snape back.

“Answer the question,” Andra demanded.

“No. He will not flinch.”

“I see,” she jotted something in her notepad – an ordinary Muggle notepad, Sirius could see, and she was using an ordinary Muggle ball-point pen. “Forgive me for being blunt, Mister Black. You bring this ... person here. You insist that he receives treatment to regrow his missing eye and restore the tissue around it. Yet, this person here, Severus Snape, is completely unaware of anything that is being done to him. He doesn’t see, he doesn’t feel, he cares nothing for the scars on his face, or for the missing eye, or for anything that you do for him. Why, then? You’ve dragged him here – all the way from Britain...”

“Yes.”

“To Ottawa, then Calgary, then Prince Rupert, then you hiked through the Black Tail woods for what must have been three days, at least, with this unfortunate unresponsive human being forced along, then took the boat to the Island. Why?”

“I don’t know, “ Sirius whispered. The truth was, Lily and James had asked him the same question, and – somehow when they did it, he didn’t feel quite so stupid.

“I see. Do you know how much this treatment costs?”

“I will pay. I’ve got money.”

“I see. So this is a luxury for you. You’ve got yourself a human doll, and you want him to look less ugly?”

“NO!” Sirius cried out, horrified. “It’s not like that!”

“How is it, Mister Black?” and she was still smiling, damn her.

“Okay – look; I know he can’t see. I know he can’t hear. I know – I understand that this might be it for him. That he might never come out, will never come out,” Sirius said. “I understand all that, all right? I just think that – even if this is all that’s left, his life should be as human as possible. He

should have a home, a bed. He should be warm, even if he doesn't feel the cold. He should have someone around him who... you know, who's human, to whom he means something. He should have both eyes. It's just – I can't bloody explain it – but it's a human thing to do, you know?"

She stopped smiling.

"I know," she said, with surprising mildness in her voice. "Yes, Mister Black, I know." She glanced over Snape's empty eye socket and reached out with her hand across the desk and touched the scarring on his cheek with her fingertip. "Very strange wound. What happened to him?"

"There was a war," Sirius said. "A dark wizard..."

"Spare me the politics. What was used to inflict the wound?"

"Cockatrice claw."

"You're lying. The scar tissue indicates that the venom had long turned cadaverous when the wound was inflicted."

Sirius looked away.

"I didn't say it was a living cockatrice, or that the claw was still attached to it."

"I see." She jotted something down in her notepad and set the pen aside. "How old is he?"

"He's twenty-two."

"So are you?"

"Yes."

She stared at him. "It seems strange that someone so young would dedicate his life to caring for someone who's got no hope of recovery. How long has it been?"

"Two years."

"How long, do you think, you'll be able to sustain it? Another two years? Another five?"

"I'm not ditching him!" Sirius said flatly. "Not after..."

"After what?"

"That's not important. Are you going to help us or not?"

"I will grow him another eye," Andra said, leaning back in her chair. "The trouble, Mister Black, is that I'm not so sure it'll help either of you."

"It's okay. You grow him the eye. And we'll go home after that. I won't tell anyone about the Institute, I promise. I mean, either way, I wouldn't..."

"I appreciate that," Andra said. "We value our solitude. Now, why don't you two go and settle yourselves in. Stu will show you to the guest room. I'm going to need to run some tests to prepare

for the treatment. What does he eat?"

"Anything, really." Sirius' lips quirked into a bitter grimace. "He's not picky, you know."

## 1981

Snape awoke with a start. He was naked and bound, arms lifted high above his head so that his skin-muscle-tendons were stretched out, tight as a drum. He'd be humiliated at his nakedness, if he were not so bloody terrified.

"Open your eyes, Severus," he heard the familiar voice.

Snape did, just as Tom's hand brushed the hair away from his forehead.

"How you disappoint me," Tom murmured, stroking his cheek. "Insolent, foolish child. So you bought your Mudblood girl and her brood another day – do you really think that she will evade me forever?"

Snape opened his mouth, but no sound came.

"Answer me." Tom's hand rested on his bare chest, as if in an attempt to capture his heartbeat.

"I don't know, My Lord."

"I wish you'd stop calling me that. It's insincere to address me this way after a betrayal so profound. "

Tom's hand traced his chest, all the way down his belly, touched his thigh and rose up to rest on his shoulder. Snape twitched under his touch.

"We'll speak again after a while. For now, I will leave you to contemplate the consequences of your treason. I insist that you think of how deeply you've wounded me and try for repentance."

Snape bit his lip and squeezed his eyes shut.

He didn't see who approached him, and didn't see the first blow coming, but he could feel his back and shoulders sliced open a minute later. He howled, twisting in his bonds, and howled again when the next blow fell on the already torn flesh.

Snape heard laughter and opened his eyes. It was Macnair who was doing the whipping; he was making a good sport of it, and his blood-splattered face looked truly happy.

There was no way to moderate his response, to keep silent. Snape screamed through all of it, sickened by the smell of his own blood, horrified even further by his own screams. He passed out once, then woke screaming again, when someone splashed hot water onto his raw shoulders and back, then passed out once more, and was brought back to life by an Enervate.

His voice was long gone by the time they'd finished cutting the skin from his left forearm, along with the Dark Mark, and as he stared at the exposed flesh and muscle on his on limb, he could only manage a voiceless gasp.

It was almost hypnotic, watching the slow disintegration of his own body, being pulled apart, taken apart, like a defective toy. Skin goes one way, muscle another, organs make a neat pile, he laughed inaudibly, madly.

For the next several hours, he had no thought, no emotion left. There was only instinct, only reaction. He dozed off when left alone. He recoiled and twitched when someone touched the wounds on his back. He trembled – small, violent tremors, when Bellatrix began to work on his right arm, carving and cutting something that hurt like the bloody hell and more, as she was creating a pattern only known to her. Maybe she was cutting through tendons and ligaments, or maybe she was just playing, there was no way of knowing.

There was no way of knowing who was watching, either. He thought he'd glimpsed Lucius' face, twisted with horror and revulsion, he thought he saw Dolohov, looking impassive and indifferent, but maybe they were figments of his imagination, he couldn't tell.

"Would you care to beg for mercy, Severus?" the deep voice brought Snape out of his fevered delirium and back to reality.

Lying on the floor, in the puddle of his own blood and filth, face and thighs covered by someone's semen (no, not someone's – that of the LeStrange brothers, he remembered that now), Severus opened his eyes to focus on Tom's face, completely indifferent.

Tom lifted his wand. A small tingle ran down Snape's throat.

"I healed your voice, child," Tom said mildly. "You may speak now."

"Yes," Snape groaned hoarsely, desperately, no shred of pride left to his name. "Yes. I beg for mercy."

"I wish I could grant you mercy," Tom said, his tone still mild. "And yet, you didn't leave me that option. I must make an example of you to others." With a sigh, he began to walk away. He turned his head once, to look at Severus coldly, and added, as an afterthought, "I regret it."

Snape felt himself being lifted off the ground, forced to sit up. A metal hoop encircled his neck, pushing his head backwards, and holding him firmly in place.

"Don't touch it with your bare hands, love," he heard Rabastan say.

"I'm not mad," Bellatrix replied, suitably insulted.

Severus stared at the tool in her hands – a wooden rod with a giant bird claw attached to it.

"His left eye first, I think," Rodolphus murmured.

It was never going to end, it was never going to be over, and he wondered if a pile of raw flesh and skin and bones without any human thought or awareness to it could still feel pain.

When the claw came in contact with his eye, he howled, hands scraping against the floor.

He needed to go, get out, and he searched for the way out desperately, as he tried to cut his throat against the edge of the metal collar (too blunt), or twist his neck in an attempt to break it (turned out impossible).

Let it all go, he thought madly, desperately, let it all go.

As far as he knew, no Occlumency practitioner had ever attempted to do this, or if they had, there'd be no way of knowing. Not simply escaping into one's own mind, but cutting everything off. He could almost see it, with his final grasp at clarity – a tiny speck of awareness, which was the core of him, numerous strands leading outwards to the outside world that was now tearing at him in so many ways.

Let them all go, those strands. One by one.

Lily was the first to go, a bright-orange string that slipped out of his fingers. Just as well, this was no place for her; it seemed both vulgar and cruel to keep her here, go, go.

Other strands followed, connections to memories, events, emotions – he let them all go, and it turned out to be addictive to be releasing those strands one by one.

The first sense to go was sight, he had no use for it.

Another strand, another connection with the outside world – another sense. No more touch, no more tactile sensations, no more pain.

Another strand. No more sense of smell, no more getting nauseated by the stench of his own blood – and whatever – whatever else they had, except he could no longer remember who 'they' were.

One more. No more taste of bile in the back of his throat, no more of that.

Good, that was good, it was working, he was getting out of there, or 'out there' was getting out of him, either way, it didn't matter.

When the last strand slipped out of his fingers, his world went quiet.

## **1983**

The room Stu had given them was bright and spacious. Sirius showered first, huffing and snorting with the simple pleasure of the hot water against his body. He walked out of the shower, a towel wrapped around his waist, and began to dress. Snape's back was still turned to him.

"You know, you don't have to be such a gentleman," Sirius said, pulling out fresh underwear from the backpack. "You could sneak a peek. A tiny one. Nobody would know."

Snape's back didn't move.

"Right. I'm not your type. Be honest with me, Snape, is it the lack of tits, or is it the hair color? Because the hair I could dye, but if it's the tits – no bloody way. I've got my limits, let me be honest with you."

Sirius didn't remember when exactly his one-sided conversations with Snape became so stupid and so lewd, but by the end of the first year of caring for Snape he'd noticed that he'd ceased censoring himself. Completely. It was like –

Like I'm talking to myself. Right.

"I wonder," Sirius said softly, "do you dream? I mean... do you have wet dreams? Scary dreams? Happy dreams? Or is it just one dream all the time, always the same?"

No answer. Right. He should be used to this by now.

"Okay, let's bathe you. You stink of dog drool. Some big ugly dog must have been drooling on you all night long. I am shocked that you'd let him; that's not like you, Severus."

Snape allowed himself to be undressed, not resisting and not making any effort to stop Sirius. Sirius guided him to sit down in the warm water.

"See, there. Tell me, does it feel good, after three days of hiking and collecting dog drool? Mmm? It must feel at least all right. Okay, let me bring your head back. I'm going to wash out your hair."

The soapy water ran down Snape's scarred shoulders. Sirius swiped a bit of foam away with his palm.

"Snape, I've got to tell you something. When you come to your senses and kill me for this – for, you know, feeding you, and bathing you, dressing-undressing you, and seeing your bits, – and when you do kill me, and when I take my last breath, please, do try to understand this. I'm not stupid. I know all of this could be done with spells. I never had to touch you. But I did anyway. And I wasn't doing it for kicks, I swear on Jay's head. I just – I thought of you, being perpetually trapped in a web of spells taking care of your body, and you never again, for as long as you live, feeling any human touch – and it creeped the fuck out of me. I think that's inhuman. I'd rather touch you and – well." Sirius grinned. "I'm a dead man, aren't I?"

He pulled at the chain, holding the stopper out and let the water rush out of the bath. Eventually, Snape was let out, towelled, dressed.

For a while they stood shoulder to shoulder by the enormous window overlooking the oceanfront. The beach was empty, with only a few seagulls pecking at clams and oysters left behind by the tide. The horizon was grey and misty, and only one single snowy mountain peak showed from the wall of fog.

"I wish we could stay here," Sirius whispered. "In some house in the woods. Just the man and his dog. And nobody would know that the man is slightly less than a man, and the dog is slightly more than a dog. It'd be nobody's fucking business, you know."

The silence stretching between them felt almost companionate.

"Snape," Sirius said. "You understand why I'm not leaving you, don't you?"

Silence again.

"You've saved my life. Yes, I know, you've saved the Potters that night, but really, you've saved me. I don't know if I could have survived them being gone. I don't think I would have. Yes, Snape, I owe you."

The waves rolled onto the shore and retreated, leaving caps of foam on the sand.

“But that’s not why,” Sirius said. “It’s not about owing. It’s just that – you’re one of us. Get it? It’s like you’re one of the Marauders now. A horrible thought, isn’t it? Quick, Snape, wake up and tell me off, tell me how repulsive the idea is to you, how you can’t stand the thought. Come on. Wake up now, here’s your chance to bow out of it.” Sirius’ hand touched Snape’s shoulder. “Too late. By the power vested in me by the great woodland of Canada, by the mighty winds of Haida, and by the power of my own stupidity I dub thee Marauder, for all eternity. And it’s your own bloody fault.”

Sirius pressed his forehead to the window. He could feel the wind beating against it, trying to force its way into the room. It was cold, the entire room was cold, and it was as if cold was somehow seeping into the room, and into his bones and into his blood. He shivered and let out a long sigh. Sure enough, he could see his own breath in the air.

Next to him, Snape hadn’t moved.



## Part II

1981

It was November when the strike force of the Order drove the enemy back with one mighty blow after another. Some died, but the others kept going. Dumbledore fought alongside the rest of them, and he was fierce. James was humbled by the extent of the power he'd witnessed and by the fact that Dumbledore had never chosen to unleash all of it – until now.

“We’ve leaned on the Malfoys,” Remus informed them, as he walked into the Order’s Headquarters in the middle of butt-fuck nowhere, Southern Wales. Sirius, standing next to him, was wiping the blood from his hands.

“You tortured them,” James clarified.

“I wouldn’t call it torture,” Sirius grinned unrepentantly. “I just had my madman smile on my face and cut my own hand in front of him. Then I cut off a lock of Cissy’s hair.... And I was so gentle about it, that good old Lucius just about pissed himself and spilled the beans faster than we could gather them.”

“Right. What did he say?”

“The Lord has an unknown quantity of artefacts that are supposed to keep him immortal,” Remus said. “We picked up one of them.” A leather-covered book of some sort appeared in his hands. “I have no idea what to do with it.”

“Let’s see if Fiendfyre does the trick,” Lily said coolly. “What?” she snapped, as Sirius and James stared at her. “It burns everything. Presumably.”

They chose a secluded spot for that. Fiendfyre really did the trick, and the book let out many a scream of horror and torment before being reduced to dust.

“Let’s drink to Peter, may he rest in peace,” Sirius said, as he led the way back to the Headquarters. They did – although barely a few drops each. It wouldn’t do to overindulge.

“One day, the war will be over, and we’ll get blind drunk,” James said. “We’ll be so pissed, Lily will have to roll us back home.”

“Mobilicorpus for both of you, then,” Lily said. She’d grown quieter as the weeks went by, and she clearly missed Harry, although she never said a word about that.

“We need to find the others,” Remus said. “That was just one of them.”

“Any idea where to look?” James asked.

“Lucius said Bellatrix has one more.”

Sirius nodded thoughtfully. “I say we go after the Lestranges. I have a few ideas as to where they might be hiding...”

“They likely know that you know,” Remus felt the need to point out. He’s changed too, James observed, his face had grown paler. He was fading, all of him – except for the eyes, the amber glow in them was only growing more intense each day, and more predatory.

“So you’re saying we shouldn’t go?” Sirius checked.

“I say we should,” Remus growled. “I just think we should make a hunt of it. It’s almost full moon, isn’t it?”

“You’ll be out of control,” Lily argued. “You’ll hunt your own as well as them.”

Remus looked at her.

“Not if you brew the Wolfsbane for me. You do know how to do that, don’t you?”

“That stuff is dangerous, and still experimental, and…”

“You’ve got three days to perfect it,” Remus cut her off in mid-sentence.

James didn’t think he’d ever hear Lily swear like a sailor, but she did. She did manage to make the Wolfsbane. It tasted worse than absolutely horrible, and Remus nearly puked his guts out onto the floor. James suspected that only thing stopping him from doing that was Lily’s wand pointed at his throat and her words – *don’t you bloody dare throw up now*.

Remus stayed put on the floor, and the Wolfsbane stayed put in his belly.

It turned out to be a great advantage – having the werewolf on their side. Hexes and curses rolled off him like water off a duck’s back. They did manage to capture the trio of the Lestranges, and cared nothing that the others had fled.

Bellatrix was the one they’d wanted, after all.

“Jay, I smell something,” Sirius said as soon as he was back in human form. “Blood.” He inclined his head in the direction of another room, locked and warded. In her bonds, Bellatrix, held back by the Longbottoms, let out a throaty laugh.

Lily took down the wards. James was the first to walk into the room.

The first words to emerge out of his mouth were, “LILY, STAY BACK.”

Miraculously, she did. Sirius followed James into the room and James could see that his friend was about to vacate his stomach right here, right onto the stone floor.

“What,” Sirius whispered, staring at the lifeless and barely human form on the floor, “what on earth is THAT?!”

James’ stomach turned out to be a bit stronger. He came up to the wretched being on the floor and turned him over.

“It’s Snape. He’s still breathing, too.”

“But…” Sirius scowled. “I mean – he…”

“He’s one of them, yes. Lovers’ quarrel, I imagine. Bloody fuck, but if they do this to their own...”

“All right... what do you want to do?” Sirius asked.

James bit his lip. It was a confusing situation. The common sense demanded to finish off the wounded enemy and keep moving. And yet – he already knew that he wouldn’t be able to deliver the coup de grâce. Not like this. More to the point, he could see that Sirius wouldn’t be able to do that either.

“We Apparate him to St. Mungo’s and drop him off in the emergency ward,” James said.

“He’ll never survive the Apparition.”

“Maybe not. But we’re out of options.”

Shockingly enough, Snape survived the Apparition and was admitted into St. Mungo’s instantaneously.

James warned the mediwizards to take every precaution in dealing with Severus Snape, and made them swear there’d be guards posted in the room, and in the hallway, and – until he was pushed out with a very unfriendly, “I suggest you let us do our job here, Mister Potter.”

They returned to the Headquarters in the morning. James told Lily about Snape, and she cried – for the second time since their flight from Godric’s Hollow. James couldn’t blame her. She likely mourned a childhood friend, someone she used to play with.

“What a waste,” James said.

Sirius shrugged. It looked like he really didn’t want to think about Snape. One way or another, Snape was a goner – if he didn’t expire in Mungo, he’d receive the Dementor’s Kiss, or a life sentence in Azkaban. Sirius clearly felt that the entire ‘saving Snape’ thing was pointless and even said so out loud.

“Mercy is never pointless,” said Remus, who’d already assumed human form. His mouth was still covered in blood.

“Right,” James agreed. “Let’s have a chat with the Lestranges. Lil, we’re going to need Veritaserum. Now, I know that supposedly it takes a month to brew it, but...”

“I’m not a miracle worker,” she snapped.

“No,” James reached for her hand and pressed his flushed face into her tiny palm. “You’re a miracle.”

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They told Dumbledore about Snape the following morning. Dumbledore reciprocated by telling the story of Snape coming to him after having passed Trelawney’s prophecy to Voldemort. Presumably, before all this, Albus didn’t feel it was his story to tell.

“Maybe Voldemort found out that Snape went to you,” James said, “– and that’s why...”

“That seems plausible,” Dumbledore agreed.

“Sure glad we took him to Mungo,” Sirius muttered, unsettled by the entire thing more than he would care to admit.

The interrogation of the Lestranges took place a week later. Lily’s accelerated version of Veritaserum worked just fine, and they gleaned a great deal of useful information. Where to look for other ‘artefacts’, how to identify them, and so on. When business was done with, Sirius asked about Peter.

In retrospect, a cowardly thing though it was, he almost wished he didn’t.

James found him outside, as Sirius stared ahead blankly, from time to time touching his lips to the glass of Firewhisky in his hand, but never taking a sip.

“It’s like he died again tonight,” Sirius said.

“Peter?”

“Yes. First we learned he died when the Fidelius came down. And now this. And to know that Snape was the one to kill him, and that if he hadn’t, you’d be dead instead, I don’t know, Jay. I want to kiss Snape, and I want to break his neck, and I want to give him the Order of Merlin posthumously, and I want to bury him on the same spot where he’d killed Peter, and piss on his grave, and build him a monument. Do you think that’s too much?”

James’ hand rested on Sirius’ shoulder.

“Just a bit.”

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It was December when they celebrated the victory – right on Christmas.

In the end, it was Dumbledore who ended up killing Voldemort, not that it surprised anyone.

People were celebrating. In Hogsmeade there were fireworks, and dancing in the street, and Sirius was intoxicated by it all: the mulled wine, the smell of fresh snow, the music, and the vibrancy of human happiness all around him. Sirius danced with Lily, then, as James threatened violence to him, he danced with James, then with Remus, just for the hell of it, and eventually with Minerva, who was blushing profusely, but letting him spin her and waltz her any way he wanted.

Sirius was happy, and drunk on life.

He was dancing with Minerva, and spinning her like the whipping top, and the world was spinning him in turn.

At one point, he turned around to speak to Lily and James, but realized that they were gone.

He felt a chill go down his spine. Suddenly sober, he pushed his way through the crowd and began to walk to Hogwarts. He didn’t know why he felt so unnerved by their absence. It was all over, wasn’t it?

Once at Hogwarts, Sirius ran up to Flitwick's rooms and knocked. The professor answered the door and kindly advised Sirius that, yes, Lily was here, to collect Harry. She was alone, saying that James had some other business to attend to.

"What business?" Sirius demanded.

"She didn't say."

Sirius arrived at Potters' old home in Godric's Hollow, fully expecting to find it empty.

It wasn't – the light was on, and he could see people walking in the room.

Sirius winced. He felt like – like he was missing something. Like his friends had cut him off.

He approached the door, stepping softly.

"Easy now," he heard Lily's voice. "Let me take your hand. Can you hold on to it? No? It's all right. I will hold on to you. Come on now, small steps."

Sirius opened the door and walked inside.

"Hey, mate," James greeted him. He was sitting on the couch, dangling Harry on his knee. "Did you kiss Minerva yet?"

"Don't be stupid." Sirius' eyes shot in Lily's direction and he saw the black scrawny shadow of a man following her in mechanical, automatic movements. "Snape? What's he doing here?"

"We brought him home," Lily said simply, as if it was just the most natural thing to do.

"Didn't seem right to be dancing the night away, while he was... you know. There," James explained. "In Mungo. Alone. He did his part, too."

"He created the entire mess with Voldemort hunting you," Sirius felt the need to point out.

"And he fixed it," James said.

"Well, you should have told me. I would have come with you."

"I wanted to, but you looked so happy, dancing with Minerva. I didn't have the heart to pull you away," Lily smiled at him, the mild, warm smile he'd almost forgotten by now. "Severus, you come with me, all right? I'm going to make the bed, you'll lie down and rest. I'm not going anywhere."

Sirius watched them go and then turned to James. "You do know that he fancied her, right?" he asked as lightheartedly as he could manage, even though the words had a sour taste to them.

James shrugged, still smiling and running his hand over Harry's hair. "I don't think it matters now who fancied whom."

"When he comes to his senses, he's going to kiss her," Sirius felt the need to warn him. "He's going to take advantage of her. There will be pity sex. And Harry's going to end up with a really

ugly half-sister, long-nosed and greasy-haired.”

“Padfoot,” James said softly, but firmly. His smile was gone.

“And Severus will insist on naming her Dementoria. Or Cadavrena. Or...”

“Sirius,” James’ voice rose a notch, and Harry stilled on his knee. “He isn’t coming back.”

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Sirius spent the night on the Potters’ couch. From time to time, he checked on Lily – she stayed in Snape’s bedroom all night, holding his hand, whispering something in his ear. Once, he collided nose to nose with James, who emerged from his own bedroom to check on Lily as well.

“Let’s get drunk,” James said, leading the way downstairs.

They did just that, and there was no more of that ‘just a splash and no more’ nonsense – they drank out of the bottle, passing it to each other.

James spoke, Sirius listened.

St. Mungo’s assessed Severus Snape and decided that he was incurable. As in, ‘completely and utterly incurable, no hope of recovery, no fucking chance in hell,’ James elaborated, staring at the bottle in the light of the hearth. “That’s what his medical chart says, ‘no chance in hell’”.

“Uh-huh. And?”

“I don’t know, mate. I look at my wife. My beautiful-beautiful-beautiful wife. And I can’t get over it, we won the war, I’m alive, and I’ve got a wife. And I know it was him who saved her.”

“He’s the one who nearly got her killed in the first place!” Sirius protested and took the bottle away. “And all of you, too.”

“Bullshite,” James let the bottle go. “The prophecy didn’t make a difference one way or another. You realize, don’t you, that with Peter working for Voldemort, Lil and I wouldn’t have survived. One way or another, he’d have got us killed. Look – I know what Snape did. I know what he is. It’s just that – in the end he did what was right. You know? And he must have some idea about what would be done to him, and he still did that right thing.”

“Yes,” Sirius admitted.

“And I don’t think I can – just leave him in Mungo. Yes, they’d be kind to him there, I know. He wouldn’t be lying around in his own filth or anything. But,” James’ voice rose slightly, “He’d be alone. Here, he’s with us. He’s one of us. Really, at the core, he is.”

“But,” Sirius started again, but James waved him off.

“Look,” James said, exasperated, “What if – I don’t know. What if it were me, who ended up like that. Would you bury me in Mungo and visit me twice a year?”

“No,” Sirius admitted. “Never.”

“It’s the same, only different,” James said profoundly and collapsed on the couch, sound asleep.

Sirius circled the living room for a while and eventually took his place at the foot of the couch as Padfoot.

He visited Potters daily for two weeks. He could see that having Snape around was taking a toll on them. Lily was getting tired, and James – James, who’d been planning to become an Auror, was now putting those plans on hold.

“It’ll be fine,” Lily denied, “We just need to settle into a routine. It’s like having another child, really.”

*Yes, Sirius thought. Another child – who will never grow up, never leave home... and you will be tied to him for as long as you live, you and James, and Harry – and deny it all you want, your lives will revolve around him.*

He didn’t want that to happen. He wanted his friends to be free. To have another baby, travel the world, and on, and on, and on. He spent the days making lists of the things that Lil and Jay wouldn’t be able to do because of Snape.

The solution presented itself another week later.

“I’ll take Snape home,” Sirius said. “He can stay with me.”

Lily gave him a very long and a very sceptical look.

“You? Sirius, you understand I have to ask – why?”

“Yes,” Sirius said. “But I understand what James is saying, about home and all. And – well, I’ve got nothing happening now at home, and it’s not like it’ll be a burden. I won’t even notice he’s with me. You’ve got Harry to take care of. And – well, it just makes sense that I take him.”

Lily hesitated.

“Come on,” Sirius said. “It’s not like I will be nasty to him.”

“Maybe for a few days,” she relented. “Until I catch my breath.”

“Right. Let’s give it a try.”

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Having Snape at home turned out to be torture. Sirius read up on his condition (TKS, or The Kissed Syndrome – like the Dementor’s Kiss, only without the actual Dementor being involved).

He had to do everything for Snape. And everything really did include everything. He used the spells for the first few days. Snape’s body moved obediently, guided by those spells, animated by them, serviced by them. Snape was in his own world, entirely lost in the purely automated cycle of sleeping-waking-eating-everything – and Sirius found himself twitching.

“The fuck with that,” Sirius said, flicking the wand to remove the spells. “We’re doing it the old-fashioned way.”

He supposed that it would be easy – with Snape not resisting any treatment or any manipulations to his body.

The first time he undressed Snape to bathe him, Sirius flinched. The sight of the scars was bad enough. The fact that Snape just stood there, without any reaction to someone staring at him, did Sirius in.

A week later, Sirius thought he'd give an arm and a leg for a good old-fashioned fistfight.

"It's like having a jellyfish," Sirius said, staring Snape in the eye. "You're one giant jellyfish. No spine. No will. What's the point?"

Naturally, Snape didn't answer.

Sirius apologized to him the next morning. Not that Snape could hear him, but Sirius still did.

He managed to settle them into a routine of some sort. Wake up. Bathroom, shower. Get dressed – "The black suits you, Snape, you look like a scarecrow." Eat breakfast. Walk outside – "Fresh air will do you good, Snape. Want to play ball?"

Sirius threw a ball at him, which hit Snape in the shoulder and rolled away, untouched. Snape hadn't moved.

In the evening, once Snape was fed and left in bed for the night, Sirius stabbed the ball with a knife and watched with malicious satisfaction as it deflated in his hands.

When Lily and Jay visited them, Sirius did his best to present a picture of perfect life. "Just two mates, sharing a flat," he said grinning, "Nothing to it. I think he'll come about one day. I really do."

"So, mate, would you be able to keep him another month, then?" James asked. "We were going to take a trip to Australia. Lily wants to attend the Potions conference..."

"Uh-huh."

"The actual conference is a week, but – I thought..."

"You'd stay there a bit longer," Sirius supplied.

"Yes. Maybe a month. Just – you know... see the world a bit."

"You should," Sirius approved instantly.

"We can take Severus with us," Lily said.

"Don't be silly. He needs routine, consistency," Sirius said. He wondered, privately, what the fuck made him such an expert on what Snape needed. "And it's no trouble. He can stay with me, I've said so already. You go."

They left quickly, and James made Sirius promise that if anything happened, anything at all, Sirius would write right away.



Sirius swore on his mother's head. Knowing Sirius' relationship with his mother, James accepted the oath with a grain of salt, but he and Lily did leave in the end.

When they were gone, Sirius felt like he was truly alone for the first time in six years. "It's just you and me now, Snape," Sirius said, barely able to keep his tone mild.

He felt angry, and he didn't know why.

He took to speaking in a voice so kind and soothing, he managed to nauseate himself. No sudden moves, no startling noises. He thought – maybe, if Snape felt secure enough, safe enough, he'd come out of his shell eventually.

Snape's shell continued living a silent, disconnected life of its own. Days passed, and nobody was coming out of it.

The anger continued to build.

A week later Sirius slapped Snape.

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The outcome horrified him: Snape didn't even flinch. His head moved as if an inanimate object, and that was all.

Sirius walked out of the flat, ran down the stairs and sat down right on the steps, hugging his body with his arms.

He returned to the flat an hour later. Snape was where he'd left him, sitting on the couch. Snape's pale cheek was bright with the print of Sirius' hand.

"That's it," Sirius said. "We're going to St. Mungo, before I kill you. Before I kill both of us."

Snape gave no response.

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St. Mungo's staff were understanding. The elderly mediwizard nodded, listening to Sirius' ramblings, flicked his wand to remove the bruise from Severus' cheekbone.

"It's not an easy task, what you were trying to do. Leave him to us. He'll be in good hands. That's what we're here for. You go and live your life, young man. Come back to visit anytime you like."

Sirius left, for the first time in his life feeling like he was given too easy an absolution. Or was it the second time? He couldn't be sure.

He spent the following day in a coffee shop, trying to write to James and Lily.

*Could you please come back?*

No.

*If I kill Snape, will you visit me in Azkaban?*

No, that wasn't good.

*Why can't he just – snap out of it? Why is he such a cowardly, selfish, spineless, unbelievably...*

No, that wasn't it, either.

*Lil and Jay, I know what I promised. Turns out, I can't do it. I just...*

*I just look at him, and whenever I do, I can't escape the feeling that...*

Sirius stood up, rolled up the last piece of parchment into the ball and sent it flying into the wastebasket.

He was in St. Mungo's an hour later, demanding to take Snape home.

Shockingly, they let him do it.

Snape was led out to him, still in the web of automated spells to move him along, as if he were some sort of inanimate object.

Sirius shuddered.

"Isn't there a way to do without that?" he asked.

"There is," the elderly wizard, the same one who'd admitted Snape a day earlier, said. "Those who'd suffered the Kiss can be trained to perform the basic bodily functions on their own. Chew, swallow, vacate their bowels at appropriate times. However," he added, "It'd take months of training the body to develop the necessary routine, to respond to numerous cues automatically, now that the mind is disengaged from the body. It's not impossible, not at all, just very difficult."

"Got books?" Sirius asked.

He left the Hospital with a pile of books in his arms, and Snape in tow. Snape, who still was unaware of anything about him and who didn't care one way or another.

When Snape was in bed that night, Sirius came to him and sat on the very edge of the bed.

"I'm sorry, Snape," he said. "I – I was angry. I still am. It's just that —whenever I look at you, I can't escape the feeling that it should have been me." The confession seemed to break some sort of a dam, and the words were gushing out in a great flood that Sirius didn't know how to stop. "I should have been their Secret Keeper. I should have been tortured to the brink of insanity, not you." Sirius sighed. "In fact, we got it all wrong. I should be sitting in your house, Snape, looking like a giant stuffed scarecrow. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

Snape was staring into the ceiling with his only remaining eye.

The silence in the bedroom was suffocating.

Lily and Jay were away, and life was going on, and the world had moved on.

Sirius shivered.

“You sleep okay alone?” he asked on an impulse. “Would you... I mean, would you mind some company?”

Sirius crawled into bed next to Snape. Stretched out and allowed Padfoot to come out. The world was really, really much simpler in the monochrome, the dog thought, stretching out next to Snape and tucking his nose into Snape’s bony shoulder. On an impulse, he licked Snape’s cheek.

No reaction. The loneliness of lying next to the breathing, living and unresponsive body was just too much, even for the dog. Padfoot whimpered, let out a long howl and resigned himself to sleep.

He dreamed of Snape petting his fur. It felt nice, for a change.

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He’d been alone for a long time, he remembered that, and nothing else. Sometimes (even though there was no time, as such), he thought that once he had a name, and lived somewhere else.

He didn’t know how he came to this world that he was now in. He suspected that he’d chosen this world at one time, but he had no idea why; he had nothing to compare it to.

The world was a giant sheet of ice, clear, thick, perfectly smooth, devoid of any irregularity. High above him hang the sky, also clear and colorless.

He walked and walked for what seemed like weeks, but in the end it seemed like he hadn’t moved at all – the sky and the ice were the same in each direction. The sky and the ice were infinite.

His world was neither cold nor warm. He was not tired, not hungry. He searched for a word to describe his state.

The word came to him an eternity later. “Alone”. It wasn’t good or bad. It just was the state of things.

He was alone in a world of ice and sky. A quiet world. He tried to speak, but he couldn’t remember how to do this, how to make the words out of the air that surrounded him. He wasn’t even sure that words were meant to be spoken. Perhaps, they were meant to remain unvoiced, disembodied. Or perhaps, words were only meant to be spoken if someone else were around.

He stretched himself out to lie on the icy floor beneath him. It didn’t feel like anything – in fact, he didn’t feel any difference between lying down, or standing, or walking.

Nothing made a difference.

And there was plenty of ‘nothing’ all around him.

He wasn’t sure how long he’d spent, just lying on his back, staring into the clear empty sky.

It could have been hours. It could have been months.

Eventually, he lifted himself on the elbow when he sensed someone else’s footsteps. The creature was moving noiselessly, but the ice under its feet trembled ever so slightly. He looked around and

stared at the intruder, trying to understand whether it was a good thing or not that this creature entered his world.

The creature was glorious.

Thick white fur glistened and almost glowed, as if reflecting a light that had come from someplace else. The beast's face was ferocious, the bared fangs were giant.

He extended his hand forward and touched the creatures' face.

A fragment of memory came with the touch.

"Snow tiger," he said, marvelling at the sound of his own voice. "You're a snow tiger."

The tiger circled around him and settled at his feet. He petted its fur, shutting his eyes in pleasure.

"Snow tiger," he said. "My name is Severus. I don't remember anything else, I'm afraid."

The tiger sighed under his touch.

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When Padfoot woke up, the fingers of Snape's mangled right hand were twined in his fur...

*It wasn't a dream, Sirius thought all morning long after that. Not a dream. Snape is there somewhere. He's doing something. He's responding.*

Sirius' enthusiasm waned considerably when he read the third book he'd brought with him. Turned out, it happened all the time, and it didn't mean anything: an automatic reaction, a reflex, nothing more. It was all just the body, the body had enough memory in it to be doing this.

Nonetheless, it became a tradition of sorts. Every night, Padfoot climbed into bed next to Snape, stretched out next to him and waited. Every night, Snape's hand would find his fur and begin to stroke.

Snape had a gentle touch, too. As weeks went by, Padfoot had learned the many different ways Snape stroked. There was the carding of fingers through the dog's hair, there was the patting, there was the actual stroking, and rubbing, and Merlin knows what. There was even the slightest pulling at the fur, a soft tug now and then, that made Padfoot press his ears to the back of his head and growl in pleasure.

\*\*\*

When Lily and James returned, they were ready to take Snape back. Sirius put up a fight and won and felt good about it.

The spring was spent with Sirius reading those books from St. Mungo's and trying to train Snape to do certain things on his own.

Snape's body learned, slowly but surely.

Snape's mind was another matter altogether.

\*\*\*

At six feet two, Sirius Black wasn't a short man. Mirosław Ackov, who'd just arrived from Durmstrang, was at least eight and three quarters. Or nine. Sirius couldn't tell, really, the man's black-haired head was too far away from Sirius' eyes to allow an accurate estimate.

It was odd to look at him, and know that this giant of a man was the world's top Legilimency and Occlumency specialist.

"You send a messenger and money," Ackov's heavily accented voice boomed. "Your money insults me. There wasn't enough of it. Your letter was interesting, however. Where's the patient?"

Sirius nodded. He hadn't expected Ackov's cutting right to business, but he appreciated it.

"Come with me," Sirius led him to the sitting room, and pointed to him to Snape. Snape, of course, hadn't moved.

"What's wrong with him?" Ackov looked like he wasn't going to perform Legilimency, but rather grab Snape by the shoulders and shake him.

"He was hurt," Sirius said. "He was hurt in the war. He's – he's hiding in his own mind, I think. Maybe you could..."

"I could," Ackov agreed. His sizable wand was in his hand, he pointed it to Snape's head and then, Ackov's face went as blank as Snape's.

Sirius stared at the scene in front of him, suddenly dreadful. He waited and waited, but the living sculpture in his living room remained motionless. It was as if Ackov had suddenly suffered the same destiny as Snape.

*I'm sorry, Sirius thought to no-one in particular, feeling like a five-year old all of a sudden. I think I ... broke him. The world's best Legilimens.*

It was only half an hour later that Ackov pulled away from Snape, whose face still wasn't registering anything.

Akov doubled over, pressed his hands to his own head and let out a whimper, surprisingly pitiful for someone so big.

Sirius took a step back.

His footsteps alerted Ackov, who got over whatever was troubling him, got up to his feet, crossed the distance between him and Sirius. The enormous hand encircled Sirius' throat.

"You," Ackov said hatefully. "Why didn't you warn me?"

"What?" Sirius croaked. All of a sudden, he was afraid to die. Die and leave Snape trapped in his own mind, and in a flat that he couldn't navigate on his own.

“You and your ilk. You feed your own to the Soul Eaters, and then you bring foreigners to take care of your problems!” Ackov roared. “Why didn’t you warn me that he’s been Eaten?!”

“He wasn’t Eaten,” Sirius protested, barely able to squeeze the words out, as Ackov’s hand continued to torment his tracheas. “It’s the TKS, it’s from pain...” He was seriously considering kicking Ackov in the bollocks. If he could lift his knee that high.

“His mind is empty!” Ackov roared. “No pain does that!”

“Empty,” Sirius sagged in his grip.

“There’s nothing there! It’s worse than nothing! There’s only the infinity of emptiness! A less skilled scholar than I would have been lost in there forever – but you don’t care for someone who isn’t of your own country, do you?”

Ackov released Sirius and looked at him with disgust.

Sirius rubbed his throat. “Empty?” he repeated. “You’re sure? He isn’t coming back?”

“There’s nothing there! There’s no man in that shell.” Ackov’s expression became even more disgusted. “If you still have any respect left for him, you will cease this mockery of care and allow the shell to go to its eternal rest, where his mind had gone a long time ago.”

Ackov left, slamming the door on his way out so hard, the ceiling trembled and dropped a few pieces of plaster on Snape’s head. Snape didn’t react to it, as usual.

Sirius paced the living room and then sat down on the couch next to Snape.

“What do you say, Snape?” he muttered. “Do you want to go to your eternal rest?”

Snape’s eye blinked. Just once.

“Right. You aren’t there. I wish you’d stop blinking. It drives me insane.”

Snape blinked again.

“You’re doing it on purpose, aren’t you?”

\*\*\*

The Snow Tiger has been gone for a long time now, or so it seemed. Alone again, Severus didn’t know what to make of it. He walked and walked, hoping to see paw prints on ice, but the ice was clear and perfectly smooth, as if no-one had ever trod on it.

“I never named you,” Severus said, addressing his words to the empty sky. “I thought about it, but then decided it might be rude. Perhaps you already have a name, who am I to impose one of my own choosing on you?”

The sky was immobile and colorless.

Severus stood still, searching for the word to describe his current state.

“Alone,” he thought.

No, that wasn't it.

“Lonely.”

The difference was subtle, but somehow he understood it.

\*\*\*

Shaken up by the encounter with Ackov, Sirius took a whole week to return to Snape's bed as Padfoot. Snape's hand buried itself in his fur instantly and began to stroke.

Padfoot nuzzled Snape's cheek and whimpered an apology. Snape's fingers tugged on his fur.

“I'm sorry,” Sirius said in the morning, as he was guiding Snape out of bed. “Maybe Ackov is right. Maybe I don't respect you. Then again, have I ever? And maybe there's nothing left in you, except that desire to pet something big and furry at night.” Sirius grinned unhappily. “Then again, if that's all that's left, you should have at least that, I reckon. It's not much, but who knows what the meaning of life is, and what the core of the human soul is? Maybe that's it. Just being able to grope at someone else's hide.”

Snape didn't argue.

Sirius developed a new obsession that day.

Having resigned himself to the fact that he was already seeing as much of Snape's mind as he ever would, Sirius decided that he'd at least take care of his body.

He took Snape to St. Mungo's again and insisted that they heal his wand arm perfectly. It took them eighteen hours, but in the end, said arm was mended and reconstructed fully, and not just patched up. The flow of magic would be unhindered, Sirius was assured, if a miracle ever took place.

He brewed a substance that would help lessen the scarring and rubbed it into Snape's shoulders and arms. It wasn't nearly enough to make the scars go away, but their appearance did diminish somewhat, and the skin looked healthier.

The left eye couldn't be salvaged – there was no way to do that, Sirius had been told. He shrugged and did some charm work, to cast an elaborate Glamour charm that covered the empty eye socket and the disfigured cheek.

“Good enough to go to the Ministry banquet”, Sirius informed Snape in early June. “You look quite dashing. Girls will be chasing you, I'm sure. But you will be cold and unattainable, and wholly indifferent to their attentions, and you will give them no time of day, because in the evening you'll be coming home with me.”

Snape was sitting perfectly still and straight, his chin lifted up ever so slightly.

Sirius laughed.

“I'm not mad. Not really. Just a bit... unhinged. You don't mind, do you?”

Snape didn't.

July was hot, and Sirius had given up on setting up a cooling charm around the flat, because he thought it made the air stale. Or maybe he just wanted to sit on the couch in his underwear with Snape and drink beer. They spent many a day doing just that – except, Sirius was the only one drinking, and the only one down to the underwear. Sirius vaguely suspected that Snape wouldn't appreciate being down to the underpants in his presence just to lounge around.

Lily and James kept visiting, although their visits had become less frequent – once a week now. But the once-a-week never stopped.

Sirius was grateful for those visits, even though he kept telling James they needn't do that, he was fine, Snape was fine, and life was grand.

To prove that point more to himself than anyone else, one August evening Sirius loaded Snape onto the motorcycle and took him for a ride.

It was a miracle that neither of them fell off, and that they didn't break their necks. Maybe, somewhere deep down, Sirius wouldn't have minded that.

Once they were home, Sirius felt spent in more ways than one. Late at night, he sunk to his floor in front of the couch where Snape was sitting in his usual spot and buried his face in Snape's bony knees, and half-wished that Snape's hand would reach to his hair in search of Padfoot.

It never did.

\*\*\*

It was September the first when the Ministry finally saw fit to tie up all the loose ends and issue awards to the war heroes.

Sirius had no idea what criterion the Ministry officials used. Maybe they decorated the war heroes much like a child decorated the Christmas tree – simply by pulling random pretty things out of the box.

Either way, the Longbottoms, Remus and five others ended up with the Order of Merlin, Second Class. Sirius and James ended up receiving the Blue Cross of Mercy each – the story of them rescuing Snape had gone around a few times, each time becoming more and more grandiose. There were three Orders of Merlin, First Class given out. The first went to Lily. The second – to Dumbledore, who declined it, graciously enough, but firmly. The third, likely at Dumbledore's gentle insistence, was awarded to Snape.

Seeing that Dumbledore had declined, and Snape wasn't really 'in there', that left Lily the most decorated war hero of the day. Sirius couldn't really argue with that.

They celebrated together – Sirius, the Potters and Remus. Lily left first, and the men stayed on their own. Snape was moved to the armchair by the fireplace and mostly ignored.

"Ah, to be young again," Remus said wistfully. "I do miss it."

"We are young," James protested.



“I don’t feel it.”

“We’re twenty-two,” James pointed out.

“Still, it’s not the same. Not the same as being sixteen.”

Sirius stared at his friend. He knew what Remus meant – it wasn’t just the number of years. It was being together at the full moon, running together as a pack, being eternally young for one night.

“The Wolfsbane. Is it working?”

“Yes,” Remus said. “It’s fine. I’m fine, really...”

“We can still do this,” James said, smiling. “How about we do it the next full moon? We’ll find a secluded spot, and just – run all night. Like we used to.”

“I don’t know,” Sirius muttered. Truth be told, the thought never even occurred to him. Not since Peter was gone.

“Why not?” James seemed surprised. “It’d be brilliant.”

“It’s just that – there was always the four of us,” Remus explained quietly. “Our magic number, the basic number of life. The four directions of the compass, the four seasons, the four elements... The four chambers of the heart.”

“Well, we don’t have that anymore,” James cut him off, a bit harshly.

Sirius stared in Snape’s direction.

James followed his gaze. “That’s insane.”

“Yes,” Sirius whispered.

Naturally, they took Snape with them.

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“I still think that’s insane,” James protested, even as Sirius was settling Snape into a folding camping chair at the edge of the woods, and casting a web of warming charms. “He’ll see Rem as a wolf – and you can kiss goodbye to any hope you still have of him coming back.”

“Or maybe it’ll just be the jolt to get him to come back,” Sirius argued.

“Shock therapy?”

“Something like that.”

Remus stripped. Sirius looked at his body, long and pale and buck naked, glowing white in the last of the evening sun. Remus had almost as many scars as Snape did – some were longer, though none ran as deep. Sirius knew that almost all of them were self-inflicted in the constant battle of the wolf against the terror of awakening. Sirius wasn’t sure if that made it better or worse.

Remus seemed unconcerned by being watched as he stretched himself until his spine cracked, the vertebra going snap-snap-snap.

“That’s disturbing,” James said.

“Good,” Remus said.

The moon came soon, and then, it was all a flurry of motion, scents, rough play, chasing and play-fighting, yielding and dominance, and being drunk on the pure freedom. Sirius lost track of time – and the human in him retreated far into the background, as the dog came out, sensing the kinship with the wolf next to him. The deer watched, amused, as the two canines sniffed each other. Padfoot was the first to growl and deliver a light bite to the wolf’s neck. The wolf knocked him over, sniffed him, and sprinted towards Snape. Padfoot recovered and chased after him, even as his dog-mind screamed DANGER, and even as he braced himself for a fight.

The wolf sniffed Snape, and the amber eyes stared at Padfoot knowingly. He abandoned Snape a moment later and ran after the deer, who galloped away, disappearing in the thick of the woods.

Padfoot nuzzled Snape’s limp hand and licked it in apology. Snape’s fingers stroked Padfoot’s neck. A moment later, Padfoot was running away, delirious with happiness. The pack had accepted the human – life didn’t get better than that.

They exhausted themselves and fell asleep together, a pile of hooves, paws, tails and antlers. When the moon had gone, the three of them rose from the dew-drenched grass, cold as hell, and completely happy.

Sirius watched Remus as he dressed.

“You didn’t touch Snape.”

“I wouldn’t have,” Remus said. “He reeks of you, and you, of him.”

“I sleep with him. He pets me,” Sirius explained, not in the least embarrassed.

“Do you think that maybe...”

“No. It doesn’t mean anything. It’s all automatic.”

“Oh.”

“Besides, you’re the one to talk,” Sirius laughed. “You reek of cat. Are you fucking a cat, Remus?”

Remus smiled.

“Maybe.”

“But – she’s– she’s fifty years old!”

“She’s a predator. I like that. She’s just as ferocious and just as dangerous, really. The only difference is the size.”

Sirius snorted. "I'll never think of the housecat the same way again, that's for sure." He stared at Remus' bare chest. "I just noticed," he trailed his fingertip along Remus' skin. "You haven't got any new scars."

"I know," Remus' grin grew bigger. "That's because you were here when I turned. I never got any when there were the four of us."

\*\*\*

The running together at Full Moon became another tradition. It didn't seem to do Snape any harm – or good. Snape just *was* – the new unchanging constant in their lives. Maybe he was the True North, Sirius thought.

"I'm sorry, you know," Sirius said once, taking Snape home after one of these nights. "For the school pranks and all. You see – we're used to this. Playing rough with each other, playing rough with others. It never really occurred to me that you couldn't handle the roughness." Sirius' hand rested on Snape's shoulder. "Then again, seems that you managed to grow yourself quite the spine. A spine and a half, I'd say, maybe a spine and three quarters. With all that spine, it's a wonder you don't have a tail."

\*\*\*

When Christmas came, they were together again: Remus, Sirius, and the Potters – all three of them.

Snape was sitting in the armchair by the hearth, the dress robes and all. His face, the disfigurement hidden by the Glamour charms, looked nearly flawless and almost beautiful in its own cold way.

It never changed expression, it always remained the same – the mask that it had become a year ago. Sirius could barely remember that this face had the potential for so much more: being twisted with inhuman rage, terror, fear, hurt, cruel amusement.

Come to think of it, he realized, he'd never seen a kind smile on Snape's face. He tried to imagine what that would look like – and couldn't.

"Sirius," Lily asked, "are you all right?"

"What do you mean?"

"With him." She cast a quick glance at Snape.

"Sure. He's no trouble. Though sometimes I wish he were."

"I've been thinking, maybe we should take turns. Harry's grown up enough, and..."

"No."

"Why not?" James interjected. "Look, we've been talking. Remus, Alice and Frank, Albus, Minerva. We could – each do two weeks, and..."

"No," Sirius said stubbornly. "Look, I'm not letting him go. I'm going to see this through to the

end.”

“The end is a long time from now,” Lily pointed out. “What are you going to do when you’re both fifty? Sixty? Ninety-five?”

“Neither of us will live that long,” Sirius denied at once, giving Snape a quick glance. “For so great had been his suffering, and so bitter the fire of his testing, and all that crap.”

His tone was light, to the point of flippant, but Lily looked away.

*Maybe, when we’re both ninety-five, I’ll do what Ackov tried to do. Enter Snape’s mind, and get lost in that vastness of infinity. Maybe I’ll walk that infinity from end to end – just to make sure it really is empty.*

He said none of it out loud.

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“It was Oscar Wilde earlier,” Sirius told Snape at the end of the evening. “I don’t imagine you ever read it. Well, I suppose, it’s time we filled those gaps in your education. I’m going to read Wild you. It’s all very moralistic and horribly serious. Lots of selfish, juvenile people in his stories. You will love them, I’m sure.”

Snape remained indifferent through the Star-Child and the Birthday of the Infanta. When Sirius read the Happy Prince, the play of light and shadow in the room made it look like Snape was smiling. He wasn’t, of course, but it was a nice thought.

At night, Sirius dreamed of Snape as the statue of the Prince. He himself was a dog, rather than the Swallow, and he was using his teeth to peel off layers and layers of the Prince to give out to the poor, and the Prince seemed completely untroubled by any of it.

Sirius woke up in cold sweat, and Wilde went back on the bookshelf.

“Only non-fiction from now on,” Sirius said. “Really, I can’t believe these are supposed to be children’s stories. Fucking creepy, if you ask me.”

\*\*\*

In March of nineteen eighty-three the Ministry of Magic passed some more resolutions and decided that the budget permitted for all the decorated war heroes to receive a generous pension. Which was just about bloody time, because uncle Alphard’s inheritance had its limits.

It’s been a year and a half, Sirius thought, watching Snape’s face one April evening, trying to figure out if Snape had changed at all. It didn’t look like he had.

Sirius knew that he was changing. He was laughing less, joking less, taking fewer risks. He didn’t regret it, and the fact that he didn’t bothered him, although in a vague way.

Lily said he was growing up. Sirius was quick to deny it.

Truth be told, he felt stuck permanently at twenty-one, along with Snape.

“We’ll always be twenty-one, you and I,” Sirius told Snape.

A mental image of Snape, with his hair grey, and his face forever young, flashed before Sirius’ eyes and he willed it away.

Summer came.

Another sweltering, cruel July, and another week of lounging around in his underwear with a can of beer in his hand, reading Potions Weekly out loud to Snape, when Sirius sat up abruptly.

“You hear me, Snape? I think we can grow you a new eye. What do you say to that?”

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Lily met Sirius’ declaration with some scepticism, and even James couldn’t understand why Sirius wanted to do that.

“Padfoot,” James spoke in a voice so reasonable it could’ve belonged to Dumbledore, “why do you think he needs a new eye?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Sirius snapped back. “Why does he need his arms and legs? Why does he need a nose? Maybe we should get rid of all that for him, too. Just to save space.”

“I didn’t say that,” James’s tone got a bit sharper. “But maybe you should try to understand why you want to do this.”

“I understand. I was deprived as a child. Mother never let me play with dolls, and here’s my chance,” Sirius shot back, irritated beyond all measure. “Look, I know he isn’t coming back. But what I *don’t* know is what being alive means. Maybe it’s all about being able to ride a motorcycle – or being able to read – or being capable of a good fistfight. Or maybe – it’s just being able to breathe and blink and pet something big and ugly and hairy at night. And just in case, Jay, just in case that what he’s got now is LIFE, I want to make sure he can get as much of it as possible. So yes. I’m doing it just in case. That’s all there’s to it.”

It wasn’t until September of the same year that Sirius finally managed to find out the location of the Institute and how to get there.

It was James who helped him pack.

## Part III

1983

The following morning the beach was still deserted, and the sky was still grey, without a hint at sunlight. Stu came out of the white two-storey building, found Sirius walking along the shore, handed him a mug of coffee and left.

Sirius stared ahead, wondering if maybe Lily's and James' initial reaction was right, and he'd made a terrible mistake.

He thought of Snape, bony body covered with a white sheet, an animated tape measure dancing around his head, in a room full of strangers, and shivered.

"I don't know," Sirius said yet again. "I thought you'd want that. Just so that you could use both eyes to blink and irritate me twice as much."

The sandy beach was wet. Sirius kicked a stray pebble and watched it roll down into the water.

"Then again, I don't know anything about you. I've no idea if the stuff that I feed you is anything you'd eat on your own. If you actually ever did read Wilde. Or maybe you prefer to sleep on your side, and not on your back – I don't know that, either. Come to think of it, I don't even know if you are a dog person or a cat person."

A wave rolled onto the beach, drenching his feet, and retreated hastily, leaving a few dull-green slippery seaweed strands on his boots.

"I don't know what was going through your head when you killed Peter. I can't know – how it was. I don't know how you've managed to grow that much spine overnight and do that one crazy thing that made you what you are. I only know that you must have been insane to do that, and I'm so glad that you were."

He shook the slippery green strands off his boots.

He wanted to go home.

Strange – to have come all this distance, and at the end of it all, to only think about how he and Snape would make it back to England, to London, their flat, half a world away, and settle into the rest of their lives.

He thought of it and realized that he no longer imagined his life without Snape's presence by his side.

Even if it wasn't really Snape living with him – just a memory of Snape, or a composite picture of Snape that Sirius had managed to piece together – and not much else.

"Sirius, your friend's treatment was successful," Andra's voice said behind him. "You may go to him now."

“Thanks.”

He didn't feel grateful, not really.

He followed her into the white building, down the corridor, and into the treatment room where he'd left Snape some twelve hours ago. Still covered with a white sheet from toes to his neck, Snape was lying on the treatment bed, on his back. His right eye was closed, and his left eye was covered by a patch.

“Let the patch remain on for another six hours,” Andra advised. “You may take him to your room now. You might want to stay here for another day or two, just to allow his body to recuperate after the treatment.”

“All right,” Sirius said.

Slowly, he guided Snape to stand up, and Snape did, allowing himself to be directed, lifted off the bed.

Sirius watched Snape, or rather, his body, walk the path that Sirius had steered him onto, through the door, down the hallway, back to their room.

There was a lump in his throat and a knot in his stomach, and what seemed like a length of even more knotted rope connecting the two. Whenever Sirius swallowed, something ached and scraped at his insides, and the knot in his stomach tightened.

There was a dreadful sense of finality to all this. To picking Snape up, guiding him back to the room, settling him to rest on the bed.

Perhaps, because this was *it*, Sirius understood with jarring clarity. There was nothing else to do: nothing to fight for, no improvements to make. Snape's body was as mended and as healthy as it was going to be, and they had nothing more to look forward to.

“All right,” Sirius said. “How about another day here, and then we go back?”

Snape's chest was rising and falling evenly with each breath.

“I wish you could see it,” Sirius said. “It's all grey: the ocean, the sky, and the sand. That's what being a dog is like – it's like you're walking the very edge of the world, where almost all colour has run out, and you know that should you miss a step, you'll fall off that edge. And it makes all your hair prickle and stand on end, and... it's incredible, really.” He ran his fingers down Snape's left forearm, where the skin tone was slightly paler. It was as if Snape were a quilt, pieced together with meticulous care, all fragments made to fit, and the scars were the seams, holding that quilt together. “Then again, you already know all about it. The edge and the falling.”

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Something had changed.

Severus knew that, could sense it – through the infinitesimal tremors in the ice under his feet, through the shimmering of air in the colorless sky.

He saw it then – a bright dot of color so high above him he could barely see it.

“Red,” he thought. “This is red.”

The red grew slightly, twisted, acquiring shape and definition. It was a string of some sort, or a strand, descending into his world from – *elsewhere*.

Severus took a step back.

*Elsewhere* was dangerous, he knew that with absolute certainty, although he had no idea where that confidence had come from.

He needed to run, to hide from that strand of red before it found him, took hold of him.

He stood perfectly still, studying that intrusion of colour, unfamiliar, alien, twisting and writhing in the air, as it stretched itself from sky to ground.

If not run, at the very least, he needed to walk away. Walk away in any direction, until that thread was lost in the infinity of nothing, without a hope of ever being found again.

*It is our choices that show what we truly are.*

That thought that ran through him was more than a memory (he didn't have any of those), more than an echo of someone's voice.

That thought was at the core of him, not forcing, not threatening, not seducing with promises.

It just was – and *this* was a moment of pure choice, no threat or promise attached to either course of action.

Severus took a step forward and grasped hold of the strand. He felt its coarse fire run through him, and pulled, and then, it was as if the sky was falling, pulled down by that thread. More threads were descending: multi-coloured, trembling, writhing, twisting, reaching for him. He was grabbing at all of them, madly, frantically, and they were encircling him, growing into him, rooting themselves in him, and then – everything was coming back, all at once, and his universe collapsed into a singularity and then exploded once more, pushing him out – into that dangerous, dreadful, horrifying ELSEWHERE.

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Sirius came awake with a start and turned to lie on his side.

He froze as he saw Snape's right hand twitching, clawing at the sheets next to him and then, reaching for the eye patch on his left eye. The eye patch, torn off unceremoniously, was cast aside and Snape gasped for air and stilled, his eyes squeezed shut.

“Snape? Snape, can you hear me?”

For what seemed like eternity Snape hadn't moved at all, as if he'd gone catatonic again, but Sirius was already sitting in bed, squeezing Snape's hand in his, shaking it.

“Snape? Snape? Don't bloody do this to me now, you've come back, haven't you?”



A tiny, barely noticeable nod followed, and Snape stilled again, as if trying to process what was going on around him.

“It’s okay, Snape,” Sirius said. “Snape? For crying out loud, say something. Anything.”

Snape’s lips moved, and something unintelligible came out, “llee, lee,” followed by a hoarse coughing.

“Lily,” Snape finally managed to make the word. “Lily?”

*Of course*, Sirius thought, last thing Snape remembers before his descent to hell – trying to save her.

“She’s fine. She’s alive, you saved her. It’s all right.”

“Son. Her son.”

“Harry is fine. Everything is okay. Has been okay for a while now.”

“How long?” Snape murmured, still keeping his eyes tightly shut.

“Two years. The war has been over for two years, Snape.”

Snape’s body seemed to relax, and then, he finally opened his eyes. He stared into the ceiling for a while, squinting and blinking as if to make sense of the colours-shapes-distances again. Eventually, he turned his head slightly to stare at Sirius.

“Seemed longer,” Snape said. “Black.”

“That’s me.”

For another long time, Snape considered that fact thoughtfully, seriously. Eventually, the corner of his mouth quirked slightly – not a smile, but something like a beginning of one.

“Could’ve been worse,” Snape muttered, and then passed out again.

Sirius stretched out on the bed next to him and let out a long, deep breath that felt almost like a sob. He couldn’t credit how much weight had just been lifted off his shoulders, and how his world has changed. He was thinking he needed to write Jay and Lily, Remus, Albus, Longbottoms, then he realized that, if they began their journey back now, they’d arrive back to England before the post did. He tried to picture the look of arrogant satisfaction on Snape’s face when he’d finally open the dusty box with the Order of Merlin in it, and that made him giddy, ridiculously so. Then he was thinking he really should thank Andra and Stu, and he was ready to thank everything around him, from the winds to the ocean, from the woods to the decrepit boat, and then, just like that, he was out of thoughts and ‘shoulds’, and he passed out next to Snape, feeling so relieved it seemed unreal.

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In the evening, Andra received the news of Snape’s recovery with surprising calm. But, lack of emotional response aside, she was a scientist, so, of course, she was interested in what had happened. She wanted to observe Snape for another week, run some tests. Snape, still speaking in

short sentences, was very much against it. He seemed so eager to go back home that he was eyeing the water of the ocean, as if trying to work out how long it'd take him to swim to the mainland, whose distant dark outline finally made itself visible in the fading mist.

In the end, Andra convinced them to stay another night, somehow managed to get Snape to agree to a few tests, (“no Legilimency!” she had to promise twice). In exchange she gave them a Portkey that'd take them directly to the East Coast, across the continent.

The tests didn't really turn up anything out of the ordinary, and eventually Andra's conclusion was the same as what Sirius had guessed by now. Back in Voldemort's keep, Snape had somehow managed to sever all input from the outside world. The new eye and the new optic nerve had formed a new connection.

Snape listened to all of that, and didn't seem to care.

He slept through most of his second day, waking up a few times to claw at the sheets and blankets, or raise his arm involuntarily, as if to shield himself from a blow—and then lower it, looking vaguely embarrassed.

Sirius let him be.

He didn't know what to do with the real Snape, now that the Snape who'd been listening to his confessions and lamentations for some two years was gone.

In the evening, Sirius walked into the communal kitchen and appropriated a few egg salad sandwiches from a large cooler and a packet of apple juice from the cupboard. Giving it some more thought, he picked up two plastic glasses as well.

He and Snape dragged two folding chairs out onto the beach, where the tide was low again, leaving a number of tide pools, teeming with life in its wake.

“Tell me what happened,” Snape said.

Sirius told him about the war, about Dumbledore, about the Horcruxes.

Snape listened in silence, from time to time nodding, it seemed, to his own thoughts, rather than Sirius' words.

“Why you?” he asked finally.

“Hmm?”

“Why am I with you?”

“It just made sense,” Sirius said with a shrug. “Lily and James had you with them for a while, but... they had Harry, and – well, I wasn't doing anything anyway.”

“I see,” Snape said. He didn't ask anything else. Perhaps, it didn't really matter to him one way or another, whose house he'd spent the last two years in. “Lily is all right?” he checked again.

“She's fine. She's doing well.”

“Did she ask about me?”

“All the time. She and James both did.”

“Oh.” It seemed like mention of James left him completely indifferent. “Can I see her?”

“Well, not right this second, but yes. We’re going back home.”

“Good.”

“She was coming to see you every week, you know,” Sirius said.

Snape winced – a barely noticeable twitch that twisted his face for a fraction of a second.

“Was I... was I... when she came...” he stammered and his eyes shifted in worry.

“You weren’t... you know... you didn’t look ridiculous,” Sirius said. “You weren’t drooling, or incontinent or – anything of the sort. You just pretty much sat there and stared. You looked a bit creepy. Kind of like the undead from the Muggle movies.”

“Good,” Snape said again. Then, after a moment’s thought, he added, “My wand?”

“We didn’t find it. When we – I mean, when we found you, back then, we didn’t look for your wand. And afterwards – it was too late. You will have to get a new one when you come back to England.”

“I understand.” Snape didn’t seem surprised. He didn’t seem interested in asking any more questions either, and his expression turned guarded once more.

“Snape,” Sirius muttered. “Mind if I ask you something?”

“Ask.”

“Do you still hate us? James, and me, and Rem...”

“Hate,” Snape’s eyes were half-shut, as he contemplated the question. “No, I don’t... think so.”

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His own response puzzled him. Mildly.

Snape didn’t know why – but his emotions were a plateau, a level field, every valley filled, every mountain brought low. Even the thoughts of Lily didn’t bring up any particular feelings except for a faint embarrassment and vague worry, despite Black’s assurances.

He didn’t know why thinking of Potter, Black and Lupin left him feeling so... flat.

Maybe it was that he’d used up all his hate in that final Killing Curse, and nothing was left anymore.

Or maybe he’d been alone too long.

Two years, Black had said.

It seemed longer, much longer than that. Snape tried to remember what that ‘being alone’ felt like, was like, but couldn’t recall anything except for a colourless sky and a perfectly smooth sheet of ice under his feet. He had a vague, unsettling feeling that he’d forgotten something, but couldn’t tell what.

Their journey home was uneventful, if troublesome – it took Black a good four hours of arguing with local authorities to get his hands on the direct Port Key to London. Which was much more preferable to waiting for the ship that seemed to follow its own magical schedule and didn’t seem in any hurry to arrive to the wizarding dock in Halifax.

Eventually, many passionate expletives and red stamps in their travel documents later, the two of them stood in London in front of a three-storey red brick house that Snape didn’t recognize.

“It’s a wizarding neighbourhood,” Black explained. “My flat is on the top floor. I live here. Well – we live here.”

“All right,” Snape said. It still confused him that he was living with Black. He’d tried asking him a couple of times about that, and each time Black just shrugged with a quiet ‘you’re one of us, don’t you get it?’

Snape didn’t, not really.

He followed Black up the narrow windy staircase to the flat, that was small, cozy, and just a tad messy.

“Your bedroom is the smaller one,” Black told him.

Snape entered it, hoping that he’d see it and recall at least something of the time here. He stared at the simple blue duvet, two pillows, a trunk with clothes by the wall, and a bedside table.

He didn’t remember any of it. He approached the bed and ran his hand over the duvet, surprised at the coarseness of the fabric, and the tiny prickling of the few feathers poking out. Everything felt strange. Unfamiliar. The world was filled with irregularities and rough edges.

“You look like you just landed on an alien planet,” Black joked in the doorway.

“I lived here,” Snape said, not moving one way or another.

“For two years,” Black confirmed.

“I don’t remember any of it.”

“I imagine you did a good job of cutting off the outside world. Even Ackov couldn’t do squat when he...”

“You brought a Legilimency Master to try and look into my mind?” Snape checked.

“Yes. Look, try not to go apeshit on me; I reckoned it was our only shot at...”

“That must have cost a fortune.”

“He couldn’t find you.”

“He wouldn’t have. I made sure of that.” Still in his clothes, Snape stretched himself out on the bed, atop the blankets and shut his eyes. “When can I see her?” he asked.

“Anytime you like,” Black said.

Snape didn’t answer. He was asleep a moment later.

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Standing in the doorway, Sirius smiled.

So Snape did sleep on his back. For some reason, it made him feel good.

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Despite the numerous questions about Lily, Snape seemed in no hurry to see her, or anyone else. Sirius owed Lily and James and told them about what had happened, and the two Patroni from the Potters arrived shortly, deliriously joyful and feisty.

Snape was asleep when they arrived and didn’t wake when they left.

In fact, Snape seemed to be quite content to just stay in the same bedroom that he’d been confined to for about two years and not do anything at all.

Snape was quiet. He didn’t have any questions, he didn’t want anything.

He had nothing to tell. The few times that Sirius had cast a glance into his bedroom, Snape was lying on the bed, his eyes shut, and his hand stroking the duvet and frowning, as if its texture were a disappointment to him.

It seemed that Snape had just settled himself in and wasn’t going anywhere, and Sirius didn’t make of it. A part of him suspected that he should be pushing Snape to get out there, into the outside world, but he didn’t know if that would do more harm than good.

He really didn’t know anything, except for the fact that he was feeling as if something was being pulled out of him, slowly, torturously. As if he was losing something, which, of course, was ridiculous; neither of them had lost anything, they both had gained the entire world.

Yet, it seemed strangely soothing to have Snape around. Just knowing that he was there was ... all right.

That is until one day, Sirius woke up to find Snape gone.

He searched the flat. His wand hadn’t been taken, and the Floo hadn’t been used. The money – whatever of it that Sirius kept at home, hadn’t been touched.

Sirius ran downstairs, cast a spell hoping to turn up a trace of Apparition and came up with nothing.

Snape seemed to have vanished into thin air. The neighbours, woken by Sirius' pounding on the door, said they saw nothing and heard nothing.

Sirius was about to contact the Potters and start a city-wide search for the proverbial needle in a haystack, when Snape entered the flat, looking absolutely calm. The befuddled and bemused look he'd had about him for the past weeks was gone. There was more confidence in the way he carried himself now.

"Where were you?" Sirius demanded at once.

Snape arched an eyebrow at his tone.

"At Ollivander's. I picked out a new wand," Snape said.

"How did you get there?"

"I walked," Snape said, as if it were the most natural thing to do.

"It's eight miles to Charring Cross Road."

"That's why I left at six in the morning," Snape said.

Sirius breathed out a sigh of relief.

"Well, bully for you. Let's see the new wand."

Snape showed it to him. It was willow and phoenix feather, pliant and flexible, and exceptionally well suited for stealth and combat spells, Snape explained.

"There's no more combat," Sirius felt the need to point out.

Snape shrugged.

"I wasn't about to start arguing with the wand. Seeing that my wand arm had been taken apart and put back together I reckon it was a miracle that any wand would be suitable."

"Fair enough. Breakfast?"

"I ate out."

"You didn't take any money."

"The lady working at the Leaky Cauldron didn't mind putting it on my tab," Snape said. "She seemed to think I was a war hero, Order of Merlin, First Class, or something of the sort. I took advantage of her confusion."

Sirius found himself grinning at that.

"You took advantage of your own confusion, more like."

"Meaning?" Snape inquired in a very chilly tone.

“You’ve got the Order of Merlin, First Class, Snape.”

“I have?” Snape seemed mildly surprised by the news.

“Mmhm.”

Snape was silent for a moment, absorbing that. Then, he demanded, “Show me.”

A minute later, the small box rested in Snape’s hands. Snape stared inside, studying the small golden disk and a striped ribbon, hanging from it.

“Well,” was the final verdict.

Sirius didn’t know what to make of it.

“How was it?” Sirius asked.

“What?”

“You know. Being out there. Walking the streets. Seeing the world.”

“Confusing and noisy.” Snape paused, then added, with shocking candor, “Terrifying. I didn’t know half the shops. I didn’t know how to navigate the crowds. I didn’t know what people were saying to me. At first I didn’t know how to speak.”

“You seem to’ve done all right with your little outing.”

“I’ve faked it all the way,” Snape said.

“I doubt anyone noticed.”

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“I want to see Evans, I think,” Snape said in the late afternoon, his tone perfectly calm. “Can you take me to her?”

“I can,” Sirius agreed, feeling more than slightly unsettled. “Except, she’s a Potter now, you remember.”

Snape’s face never changed expression.

“Of course. Potter. I want to see her, regardless.”

“I’ll let them know we’re coming.”

“Fine.”

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Snape was ready to go half an hour later. His hair, that had grown even longer over the last two years, was now flawlessly brushed and tied back into a ponytail. He was wearing the dress robes that he’d gotten out of the closet, and the Order of Merlin was pinned to his chest – just the right

way.

His back was straight, almost unnaturally so, and he held his head high. His lips were pressed into a thin line, and a deep line on his forehead made him look just a bit older.

He managed to look... -- Sirius searched for the right word – Snape managed to look almost regal in the way he carried himself now.

*He looks regal, and majestic and every bit the hero; and he's completely and utterly insane, and he's about to put the moves on my best mate's wife, and I'm insane enough not to try to stop him, and if it comes to wands with Jay, I'm not hundred per cent sure who I should be fighting for. Maybe I'll just stun them both and give their wands to Lil.*

That seemed like as good a plan as any other.

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They Apparated to Godric's Hollow together.

Snape walked to the Potters' house quickly, without faltering in his steps or looking back. He knocked on the door – two well-aimed knocks with his fisted hand, and waited.

Sirius was right behind him, not sure if he should be anticipating disaster.

The door opened and James stepped aside to let them in.

“Snape,” he said, extending his hand, “good to see you.”

Snape shook his hand – briefly, but without any obvious revulsion.

“Potter,” he said. Sirius held his breath.

“That's me.”

Snape stared at him.

“I believe courtesy requires me to make small talk of some sort. Whatever may be the socially acceptable version of ‘I'm glad you aren't dead, your house looks fine’ – let's assume I've said it. May I see Lily now?”

For a moment James looked taken aback, but recovered quickly.

“No problem. She's just putting Harry to sleep. She'll be right down. Would you care for a drink?”

“No, thanks.”

“Would you care for...”

“No.” Snape hesitated for a moment, then said. “Black tells me you and her had housed me for two weeks or so after the war was over.”

A long silence hung between them, Snape regarding James guardedly, and James clearly trying to



come up with some sort of response. Eventually, James spoke.

“Snape,” he said. “ You’re one of us. Like Sirius, like Rem, like the Longbottoms, like Dumbledore. You’ll always be welcome here. And that’s pretty much all that I can say about that.”

Snape opened his mouth, but didn’t get a chance to reply: Lily ran down the stairs then, and James stepped aside one more time, allowing her to come face to face with Snape. They watched each other silently, and eventually Snape took her hand in his, delicately, uncertainly.

“Can we speak in private?” he asked.

“We could go out into the garden,” she suggested, giving James a quick glance.

“I’d like that.”

They walked out of the house, and Lily shut the door behind them.

Sirius let out a long breath. “I need a drink,” he said.

“You know where everything is. Help yourself.”

Sirius did just that, and James joined him.

“You aren’t nervous?” Sirius asked.

“Why would I be?”

“You know. Him. He’s...” Sirius looked out of the window, where, in the red-golden autumn garden, Snape and Lily sat on the bench, half- facing each other.

Snape was still not a pretty man, but whatever he had about him, worked for him now. He was no longer someone desperate for HER attentions, HER smiles. He was every bit her equal, and he carried himself like he knew it.

“Yes,” James followed the direction of Sirius’ gaze, “he turned out all right.”

“Better than all right, I’d say.”

“Maybe,” James didn’t argue. “But no, I’m not nervous. I know Lily.” James shook his head. “No, the worst she’ll do to me is bring Snape into the house and tell me we’re going to be one happy joyful family.”

Sirius twitched. “Harry, say hello to Cadavrena.”

James shook his head. “Dementoria, I insist.”

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The garden was still. There was no wind, no movement – as if everything, including time itself, just held its breath. Sunlight poured through the tops of the whistle-wood trees, and the carpet of leaves on the ground glowed, as if ready to burst aflame.

Snape watched that glow, surprised by the intensity of it. He'd forgotten how bright the autumn could shine, and how bright Lily's hair was.

"I don't know what to say," she was the first one to speak.

"I'm not sure what to say either," he admitted. "Tell me about what happened."

"Sirius must have told you..."

"Some. I can't say I paid attention. I was... slightly unhinged at the time."

"All right then." She spoke for a long time, telling him her life, their lives. Snape did his best to listen, but the events she'd told him seemed to be getting lost in the sound of her voice, and in the sore mess of his own thoughts. He still made an effort to hear her, to capture as much of the story as he was able to. In the end, he knew only one thing: she was all right.

"I'm glad," he said.

And then, another silence stretched between them. He felt a bit like he did before, when the sky of his quiet, lonely world was coming down, and the long-forgotten strands – things unsaid, conversations unfinished – were descending into his hands.

He grasped at one of them.

"I'm not sure if it still matters to you," he said, "about the things back in school. I just want you to know that my apology to you back then... wasn't insincere."

She nodded, looking away, looking strangely guilty all of a sudden.

"What?" he asked.

"It's about back in school."

"What about it?"

"That day. When – they – they were tormenting you. By the lake. I saw what was happening – and I smiled," she whispered, still not meeting his eyes. "I don't think you saw that."

"I saw." Snape shrugged. "It doesn't matter. It didn't back then, either."

For a moment she looked like she might cry, but didn't – she just sniffled a bit, and gave him a weak smile.

"Looks like it's not about apologies anymore, anyway," she said.

He couldn't disagree with that.

He knew that something was gone, something of what he used to feel about them, himself and HER.

He didn't know when or how it happened, maybe it was peeled off of him, and torn out of him ...

Or maybe, that one orange strand that he'd let go before all others, never came back.

Then again, he thought, perhaps it came back different – fainter, thinner, but stronger, too. He could hope.

He extended his hand to her. "Friends, then?"

"Of course. Always." Her fingers barely brushed his.

They both laughed out loud, awkwardly, but with obvious relief.

"How are you doing?" she asked, studying his face with concern. "Really?"

"All right, I suppose." He frowned, adding, "A bit confused at times. I've got a new wand though," he added with a small smile. "It seems to be working."

"If you need a place to stay, to gain your bearings – to just rest... you could stay here for a while."

"James said the same thing. I understand that you were taking care of me for a few weeks while I was..." Snape frowned, looking for a suitable word, "*disengaged*."

"Yes. We still have the guest room, we haven't touched it."

"Really?" Snape asked.

"Yes," she smiled just a bit. "I suppose, deep down, I kept hoping that one day you'd walk through the door – and stay." She looked at him with hope. "Stay?"

He cast a quick glance in the direction of the house and at the kitchen window, behind which, the silhouettes of Potter and Black were visible.

"Stay," Lily said again.

"Don't you think James will be irritated if I do?"

"Not at all."

"Pity."

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Jokes aside, it felt good to stay.

He was surprised at how little tension there was between him and James. Perhaps, Lily was right, and it wasn't about apologies anymore, and the past somehow exhausted itself and collapsed in on itself, in a puddle of broken bone and torn ligament.

James laughed a great deal, brought out more Firewhisky, told stories about Auror training that he was pursuing – although he kept dropping out and coming back.

"You'd be good at that, I imagine," James said, eyeing Snape critically. "Besides, Sirius tells your

wand is well suited for combat spells. It'd be a shame to let that go to waste."

Snape listened to him and nodded absently, lost in his own thoughts. It felt good to hear them speak, hear them laugh.

It felt like being *home*.

For that matter, Black seemed to have made himself at home more than anyone else. He was laughing louder than everyone else put together, drinking more, as if trying to catch up on all the things he'd managed to miss in the last two years.

Snape wondered briefly what those two years had been like – and then let that thought go. He imagined it didn't matter anymore, either.

Before that day, Snape had never seen Lily drunk – or even slightly tipsy. Now, she was – and it suited her. She wasn't saying anything silly or embarrassing, but her cheeks were bright pink, and her eyes were shining.

When it got quite late, Snape found the guest room on his own and spend a long minute staring at his surroundings. Another place to call home, and he didn't recognize it. Yet, not recognizing wasn't bothering him. Downstairs, Sirius and James were laughing and Lily was making half-hearted attempts to quiet them down.

Eventually, they settled down some, and she came upstairs too, and scratched at Snape's door before walking in and sitting down on the edge of his bed.

"Sometimes I wonder," she said, sounding blissfully happy and mellow, "about how it's going to be with Harry."

"What do you mean?" Snape asked.

"Well... you pretty much destroyed the prophecy," Lily explained. "Don't get me wrong – I'm happy about that more than I can even begin to understand. But – I do wonder... what it'll be like, growing up, knowing that there'd been a destiny once, and then, it was pushed aside to make room...well, for life, I guess."

"Maybe it wasn't pushed aside," Snape whispered.

"How do you mean?"

"Maybe he already fulfilled his destiny. I mean – I did what I did... because I knew you wouldn't give him up. Because I knew you loved him. Maybe this is what, in the end, made him stronger than Tom. That you love him."

"I didn't think of it that way," she confessed, flushing in embarrassment. "Then again, I reckon, pushing destiny aside for the sake of life – that's... grand in itself."

Snape found himself wanting to laugh.

"Isn't it just."

He reached for her hand and kissed it.

When she was gone, he kicked his boots off, and stretched out on the bed. The linens smelled of lavender and mint, and it was soothing without being cloying or overly sweet, and he inhaled deeply, greedily, no longer caring to remember the other world, a world without smells, a world where NOTHING mattered.

Here, everything mattered. There was an undercurrent of fierce passion in everything around him, even in the quiet exchanges with Black and Potter, and in the conversations with Lily.

Snape couldn't help but be amazed at how instantly he was accepted as 'one of the gang'. He wondered, briefly, if that was actually true – it's not like he'd changed sides rationally, it's not like he'd recanted his errors or made vows or promises.

Yet, nobody seemed to expect any of that from him; somehow, one single choice he'd made two years ago, turned out sufficient.

That surprised him – and didn't, at the same time.

He himself was used to choosing his acquaintances carefully, weighing the pros and the cons before making the choice of approaching someone.

Potter and Black, who'd been quick to make judgments and loathe someone, needed just as little to turn around and accept that same someone with reckless self-abandon.

That reckless passion seemed to run at the core of them. That, and the unvoiced faith that one single moment of choosing could have as much weight and value as years of errors.

Maybe choice is like life, he thought.

Maybe you only live once; and you only choose once, as well.

On an impulse, Snape rolled up his sleeve and stared at his left forearm, where the skin was paler than elsewhere, and where the Dark Mark used to be.

*Used to be.*

He still remembered with crystal clarity HOW it was forced to come off, and found himself smiling, just a little madly.

He was rid of it. It must be worth shedding a bit of skin.

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Sprawled on Potter's couch, Sirius woke up at dawn when he heard the footsteps. Someone was treading carefully, softly, clearly not wanting to wake him.

"Snape," Sirius mumbled through his sleep. "Are you going for another walk to Charring Cross Road? It's more than eight miles from here, you realize."

"I didn't want to wake you," Snape said.

There was something different in his voice now. It was more guarded, more even, less relaxed than

yesterday.

Sirius rubbed his eyes and yawned, forcing himself to sit up.

“Snape, would you like some tea?”

A brief silence was followed by a short, “Yes, actually.”

“Then go ahead and make some.”

“Oh.”

They sat outside, on the porch still damp from the night’s rain. Snape cradled the mug of tea in his hands and stared into it, as if trying to see if the tealeaves on the bottom of the mug would tell him something.

“What do you see?” Sirius asked, turning to him.

“I should go.” Snape set the mug, untouched, on the porch.

For some reason it stung to hear that. Just a bit.

“I thought you liked... you know. Being with us,” Sirius said, cautiously.

“I did,” Snape said simply, then amended it to a quiet, “I do.”

“Well... you’re still... I mean, look, you must know by now, it’s not about pity, or owing, or any shit like that. You’re really... you know, you’re family. And it’s been less than two weeks since you came back. You could take your time. Stay with us a while. Either me – or them.”

Snape nodded absently. “I could, yes.” He smirked slightly, but without much amusement. “It’d be nice, Black, I won’t deny that. To stay in the bedroom I don’t remember. To be with others. To not have to think about what to do next, how to get from point A to point B, and how many of those points are still ahead.”

“Right. So why are you going now?”

Snape’s answer didn’t surprise him, not really.

“Because I can. If I stayed another day, I’m not sure I would be able to leave.” Snape rose to his feet and extended his hand to Sirius. “Black, knowing you, I half-suspect that you took me in for some unhealthy, nefarious reason – perhaps, in order to perform some deviant sexual acts on my unresponsive body, or something of the sort.” The corner of Snape’s mouth twitched again, as a smile fought to get out. “However, fortunately for both of us, I remember none of that. Therefore, I must thank you for your kindness, an unlikely thing as it may be.”

Sirius glanced at Snape’s hand, but didn’t take it.

“Snape,” he said again, troubled. “Wait. Where are you going to go?”

Snape stared ahead, where, beyond the road, a large field of yellowish grass was catching the first of the morning sunshine.

“Out there.”

“Right. And how are you going to get OUT THERE?”

“I think I’ll walk for a bit, then Apparate.”

“Are you bloody insane? It’s too early for you to try Apparition.”

“I think I can do it. I can feel it.” Snape smiled – and this time, it was an actual smile.

*Right, Sirius thought, all those days and months of wondering what his smile looks like – now I know.*

He fought the nearly irresistible urge to punch something, maybe break something. “I’m warning you, Snape, when you Splinch yourself, I’m not going to take care of you. I’ll bring a pile of your dismembered limbs to Mungo and dump it there, at the doorstep.”

Snape scoffed at that. “As long as you bring the torso along, too, I don’t mind. Good day, Black.”

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His bravado aside, Apparition turned out difficult to manage. It made him dizzy, almost to the point of being nauseated – much like the first time he’d ever tried it. Standing in the middle of Diagon Alley, he took a minute to catch his breath, to gather his thoughts.

The thoughts were refusing to be gathered. Or, perhaps, there were just too many of them. There were the thoughts of food, the thoughts of needing to find shelter, the thoughts of whether his house back in a Muggle neighbourhood of Manchester was still there – and whether his books were still intact. Then, quite logically, there were thoughts of money: he remembered he had a pension, then, by extension, he remembered that the Wizarding World had a bank.

He shut his eyes, trying to arrange all those strays into one logical chain.

Bank. Money. Food. Flat. Sleep. Books.

Yes. That made sense, except the prospect of dealing with all that was still daunting.

He didn’t know how people did all that on their own.

The world with so many colours, voices and noises, and rough edges, seemed terribly and needlessly complicated.

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He had a home by the end of the day – a small flat on the top floor of one of the few unremarkable buildings that had sprang up right next to the Leaky Cauldron. By the following afternoon, he had linens, dishes, and his mother’s old books that he’d retrieved from his Muggle home. Come to think of it, he had everything he needed.

More to the point, the world was becoming more manageable, more familiar, more predictable. Sometimes, it even seemed like it was turning into the same world of colourless sky and perfectly

even ice that he was used to already – all strings released, all incoming noise shut down, the perfectly predictable eternity of unchanging space as far as the eye could see.

It seemed... reasonable.

Certainly, more reasonable than the very frank and candid conversations with Black – Snape didn't know what had come over him to speak to Black so freely – as if, upon waking, he had no inhibition, no common sense. Then again, perhaps, after spending two years in Black's care, embarrassment seemed pointless.

It was almost too bad that Snape didn't remember anything of those two years. He tried – and he couldn't. His body seemed to remember the oddest things – a touch of someone's hand on his back, or a sensation of someone brushing his hair away from his shoulders. He knew that those memories couldn't possibly be real – and yet, it was as if something was amiss.

A week later, Snape dreamed of the white tiger again.

"Maybe it's you that I've missed," Snape said.

The creature's ear twitched at the sound of his voice.

"I never named you," Snape told him. "I suppose it's too late now. Still, maybe I should – seeing that it was you who kept me sane." He thought of it for a bit. "Well, relatively sane, at any rate."

The tiger arched his back out. Snape reached for it – but the creature was gone before Snape's hand could touch it.

When Snape woke up, he was alone in bed. He wondered where those dreams were coming from while he was unresponsive – one strand that he managed to forget to cut off? An echo of a memory that he'd forgotten to let go of? Either way, he reasoned, he couldn't complain.

The knocking on the door startled him, banishing the remnants of sleep.

Snape walked down the narrow hallway to open the door and found himself face to face with Black.

Black, who seemed to be more annoyed than glad to see him.

"I was about to break in," Black informed him. "You sleep like the dead."

"How long have you been knocking?"

"Half an hour, at least."

"Impossible."

"Well, at least seven or eight minutes," Black amended, and poked his head inside. "Let me come in?"

"Come in," Snape agreed, somewhat reluctantly and more than a bit awkwardly.

Black strolled into the sitting room and made himself at home in one of the armchairs, sitting



sideways in it, and throwing one leg over the armrest. He kicked his boots off. Snape arched and eyebrow at that.

“Nice place,” Black said, seeming untroubled by Snape’s staring.

“I’m glad you approve”, Snape said, sitting down on the couch across from him. “What would I do otherwise?”

Black sighed.

“Snape, if I’m bothering you – do say so, don’t hold back. Politeness doesn’t suit you.”

Snape considered it for a moment, feeling once again like he did back in his own quiet world, a single bright-red strand descending from the clear, colourless sky, and a choice: take it or leave it.

“You aren’t bothering me,” Snape said, a bit too quickly, then qualified it with a slightly dryer, “much.”

“You’re all heart.”

“Oh no. I’m much more complex than that. I’ve got liver and spleen, too.”

“I don’t know if I can handle that much complexity.” Black glanced at him briefly, guardedly.

“You feeling all right?”

“Yes.”

“Your wand works for you?”

“Yes.”

Another string of questions-and-answers followed – the questions from Black, the monosyllabic responses from Snape. It was awkward.

More than that, it was maddening. Being so near to Black made Snape feel as if he needed to understand something important.

“How are you?” Snape surprised himself by asking.

Black seemed just as surprised by the question, if not more. “Great. I went out to fly this morning.”

“The broom?”

“I’ve got a flying motorcycle.”

“Oh. Did you enjoy it?”

“For the first few minutes.” Black smiled sheepishly. “Then, I had this dreadful thought – for a split second I was certain that you’d been there with me at first, and then – just fell out. Stupid, but...”

“I managed to ruin your morning even in absentia,” Snape summarized.

“Try not to sound so pleased.” Black scowled at him.

“I do have to ask – why would you picture me on the motorcycle with you? It’s not like we ever...”

“We did, actually,” Black said, looking vaguely embarrassed. “I took you for a ride, once.”

“While I was...”

“While you were. Yes.”

Snape paused a minute, trying to picture that – his own unresponsive, blind-deaf-mute-unfeeling body, pressed into Black’s, high above the city’s skyline, high above the rest of the world. It didn’t make sense. Nothing about Black made sense.

“Sounds charming,” Snape said dryly. “Though I can’t help but wonder, Black. What *else* had you been doing to me in these two years?”

Black’s face paled – just slightly, but he recovered instantly, grinning.

“Why, I whored out your lifeless, unresponsive body in Knockturn Alley, of course. What else could I do?”

Snape inclined his head.

“Understandable,” he said in a perfectly monotone voice. “How else could you afford all the nice things that you’ve got. Why, those old socks alone must have cost a few sickles.”

“Oh yes, Snape, it only took two weeks for you to earn me enough money for those.” Black’s grin faded. “To answer your question, Snape – I was taking care of you. Not with the spells that they have for that, but...”

“I see,” Snape mused, then added, “you touched me.”

“I did,” Black agreed, giving him a strange look, then followed the confession with a question. “Are you going to kill me now?”

“That seems like too drastic of a measure. If the memory of touching me is so unsettling, I could just Oblivate you.”

“That’s not what I meant, and you know it,” Black seemed to relax a bit. “Do you remember any of it?”

“No. But...”

*But I think that I keep seeing something , just out of the corner of my eye, and I think that if I try hard enough, I could remember – something. An echo of a voice, a trace of human touch. It shouldn’t be possible – to miss so much something I don’t remember.*

“I can’t stand this anymore,” Black said suddenly. “This is bloody ridiculous. We’re just beating around the bush, and – neither of us is saying or asking what he wants to say. Something needs to be done about that – Snape – have you got alcohol?”

“It’s eight in the morning, Black. You mightn’t care – but other people, people who have responsibilities, jobs...”

Black snorted derisively. “You don’t have a job, do you.” That wasn’t a question, not really.

“No,” Snape admitted.

“But you’ve got alcohol.”

“Yes.”

“Bring it. It’s a good excuse to loosen inhibitions.”

“I tend to value my inhibitions.”

“They’ll be back with you when you sober up – along with shame, guilt, headache and nausea and the general sense of self-loathing.” Black’s eyes sparked with amusement. “You’ll appreciate them more then.”

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It turned out that Snape had Firewhisky. Sirius grinned, as he studied the bottle, lifting it to light. The sunshine, streaming through the window seemed trapped in it, a tiny knot of fire, swimming in the confines of the glass encircling it.

“I’m going to open the windows, let some fresh air in. You get the glasses,” Sirius said.

“It’s November. Are you trying to freeze us to death?”

Sirius waved him off. “We’ll never die, Snape. We’ve missed our chance.”

The wind gushed through the room, making the white curtains flutter like sails of a boat.

“You even have clean glasses,” Black teased, “why, Snape, you never cease to shock me.”

Snape poured the Firewhisky into the glasses and handed one of them to Sirius.

“Black. Do hurry to get drunk and say whatever you haven’t got the courage to say otherwise.”

“You first,” Sirius watched him appraisingly, and checked a long minute later. “How are those inhibitions?”

“Repulsively lacking. Black, what did you do to me, while I was out cold and unaware of anything? Other than groping me and taking me along on the motorcycle rides.”

“You won’t believe it,” Sirius said. “I – I don’t even know where to begin.”

“The Knockturn Alley then?” Snape checked, seeming vaguely amused.

“Oh, no. Worse, I’m afraid.”

“Black – what could possibly be *worse*?”

“I brushed your teeth and combed your hair. Daily.”

“You have my sympathies.”

“And I took you to Remus on the full moon.”

Snape nearly choked on his Firewhisky. “That does seem to be a recurring motif for you,” he muttered. “He didn’t turn me, did he?”

“No! It wasn’t like that – it was safe. Ah – you probably didn’t know, but Jay and I are Animagi...”

“Unregistered, of course. So what’s Potter’s beast?”

“He’s a stag.”

“He’s a deer,” Snape’s lips twisted into a rather unkind smirk. “How fitting. Black, you –arsehole, you’ve no idea what I’d have given for this piece of information some six years ago.”

“Right. Jay and I would have still been in Azkaban, hmm? For illegal use of restricted magic?”

“Most likely,” Snape let out a small laugh. “And what are you, Black? No, let me guess. It must be something utterly useless and ostentatious. A peacock?”

Sirius bared his teeth in a rather canine sneer.

“Try again.”

“An amoeba?” Snape guessed.

“Now you’re just being stupid.”

“I’m trying to come down to your level. Not an easy task, I assure you .”

“I’m a dog.”

That did cause Snape to smirk, just a bit. “A poodle, I hope?”

*Whatever on earth made me think that, as a drunk, he’d be more agreeable?* “I’m a wolfhound, Snape.”

“I see. Remus’ inner wolf must be thrilled by the company.”

“You don’t get it,” Sirius said, both irritated and for some reason desperate for Snape to actually understand. “He’s safe when we’re with him. Our minds become simpler, more primitive – no, please do wipe that sneer off your face – and his mind becomes more human. It’s like we meet half-way. Snape!” Sirius almost cried out, “You probably won’t believe me, but it’s... it’s an amazing thing. It’s life as it really is. It’s primal, and wild, it’s the adrenaline and the chase, and being a part of the pack, and relying only on instinct to guide you, and seeing the nature of all things, looking to their core. It’s almost – sacred! And you were there, with us. You got to see us

together the way that nobody else sees, ever, not even Lil. Having you there with us meant something. Well, to us, it did.”

Snape nodded, just a bit. He was no longer smirking or sneering. If anything, he seemed to understand – at least, in part.

“I wonder what else I’ve missed,” he muttered. “What else had gone around me that I don’t remember.”

“The motorcycle ride was only once. I nearly killed us both.”

“Unsurprising.”

“My turn now,” Sirius said. “Truth for truth. Did you dream?”

Snape took a while to answer, and for a while it seemed like he was going to bow out of the truth-for-truth arrangement. But he did answer, eventually.

“All the time. One long endless dream.” Snape’s eyes fixed on Black with shocking intensity. “My turn again.”

“You ought to be joking. You’ve asked at least seven questions, I only managed to get in one.”

“My answers are worth more than yours,” Snape said. “Oh, very well. You may ask again.”

Sirius intercepted Snape’s gaze and held it. If it were a physical thing, Sirius thought, he’d have holes in his chest by now.

*Now or never.*

Come to think of it, ‘never’ seemed rather appealing at the moment.

“I slept with you,” Sirius blurted out.

“Black, that’s not a question.” Snape seemed untroubled by the confession.

“I know. I slept with you. You petted my fur.”

“Your – oh.” Snape took a minute to process that statement. “I remember that, at least.”

“You --“

“I saw you, back there,” Snape said simply. “In a manner of speaking.”

“You dreamed of a dog?!”

“Not exactly.”

“What was I?”

“You had paws and tail.”

“You aren’t going to tell me, are you?”

“No. Speaking of the dog, let’s see him.”

Sirius grinned.

“Thought you’d never ask.”

He didn’t even bother standing up.

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A moment later Padfoot stretched himself in the armchair that was definitely too small for him and sniffed the air. Then, he trotted toward the human, watching him guardedly. The human was eyeing him with curiosity.

Padfoot slowed his approach. The human didn’t move.

It wasn’t the same human as before, the dog-mind thought. The human smelled slightly different than before, the difference was subtle, but Padfoot noticed. Yes, different, something had changed about the human, it was as a switch had taken place – and someone else took the familiar human’s form.

Padfoot pressed his ears to the back of his head and growled at the impostor.

The human smirked.

“You know,” he spoke, “it’s really surprising, that someone so attractive in human form would turn out to be such a bloody ugly dog. You’re hideous, you know that, don’t you?”

Padfoot continued to growl. Some of the human’s words were hurtful, cutting, like sharp pebbles on the beach. And yet... his tone was warm and mild, almost affectionate. Padfoot didn’t know what to make of it.

The human sat up straight and extended his hand to the dog.

“There. Go on. If you’re going to bite, you may as well get it over with now. I suggest you go for the thumb if you want to do some significant damage.”

Something hurt about those words once more, and Padfoot quieted, staring at the hand offered to him. The human seemed unafraid and unconcerned.

The faded to near monochrome world, usually simpler than the man-world, was now confusing. The pale hand extended to him was thin, long-fingered, scarred. Padfoot remembered now, the OTHERS had bitten him and clawed at him, this human; maybe that’s why he wasn’t afraid, he’d run out of things to be afraid of; what could a dog do to him that OTHERS hadn’t already?

The hand remained in front of Padfoot’s nose, empty and open.

“You aren’t what I imagined,” the human told him. “Then again, I suppose, neither of us turned out to be what the other had imagined.”

The human's voice was even and measured, but there was a sadness in it, a quiet note of it, that a man's ear would have missed, but the canine didn't.

There was a longing that came then: the longing for that OTHER human, the one who had been known to touch him, pet him, pull at his fur. Was he gone now?

"I enjoyed it," the human said. "When you visited me, I enjoyed it. It made me believe the world wasn't empty."

That part Padfoot understood. He stared up, catching the human's gaze. He liked it: the human's face was calm, but the eyes were as wild and feral as any dog's or wolf's. Those eyes must have seen other worlds, too – empty, terrifying, incomprehensible; only something like that could fashion a glare so intense.

"I'm thinking now – maybe it doesn't have to be empty," the human said.

The human continued to stare, and Padfoot stared back, feeling like his hair was standing on end, and there was the faintest prickling of danger on his hide. He already sensed that they'd be walking more of those other worlds together, and he suspected the human knew that, too.

Padfoot took one last step towards the human and nuzzled the open hand. The long fingers cupped his chin, and then began to stroke and scratch.

Yes, that felt good, good and familiar; nothing had been lost.

Padfoot sighed in appreciation as he inched closer and closer until he finally came to rest with his head placed on the human's bony knees.

~ fin

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